Neither Mercenaries nor Masterminds: Campaign Staff and Consultants in American National Elections

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Abstract

Campaigns play a key role in shaping how Americans experience electoral politics, yet the way in which professional campaign operatives understand and approach their work has received relatively little scholarly attention. Most accounts of campaigns' strategic decision-makers treat them as masterminds – individuals who devise tactics based on brilliant political insight or masterful data analysis. Others assume they are mercenaries, milking the electoral process for all the money they can regardless of their own ideological commitments or what might actually help candidates win elections. Neither of these approaches is sufficient to understand how political professionals understand their work; they ignore both the fundamental uncertainty of campaign effects and the particularities of the work-world of political operatives. Drawing on 79 interviews with 67 campaign staff and consultants with high-level experience in Presidential and Senate campaigns, I argue that they should be understood as participants in a field of cultural production, which functions much like other arenas where communicative materials are crafted. Gaining esteem and coveted positions within the field is most participants' primary motivation, and the quality of the messages, images, and strategies they produce is judged less by measurable effects on voters than by an internally-generated set of norms and ideas about best practices.

Introduction

Campaigns are a key way Americans can be connected to parties, candidates, elected officials, and the political process itself. Every two years, when national elections come around, Americans are inundated with campaigns' communications: they see campaign advertisements on television and online, hear speeches and more ads on the radio, get countless flyers in the mail, receive robo-calls and live calls, and may even find a canvasser knocking on their doors. In 2016, nearly \$1.5 billion was spent by the formal presidential campaigns alone,¹ total election spending exceeded \$6.4 billion,² and from January 1, 2015 to October 30, 2016, just over 3.3 million political ads for national-level races were shown on national television.³ All in all, a total of \$9.8 billion was spent on advertising by local, state, and national campaigns.⁴ In the "battleground states" where Presidential campaigns focus most of their attention, the intensity of political messaging was even greater, if not slightly one-sided. Both candidates directed most of their ad-buy firepower at six states: Nevada, Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania.⁵

Put simply, campaign-generated messages and images suffuse most types of media in election seasons, and campaigns also contact people directly through every medium available, as well as in person. What campaigns do informs not only how people see the candidates and parties in those campaigns; it also constitutes a large part of the political culture amidst which individuals come to understand democratic politics more broadly.

¹ According to FEC data: <http://www.fec.gov/disclosure/pnational.do>.

² According to non-partisan watchdog Open Secrets: <https://www.opensecrets.org/overview/cost.php?display=T&infl=Y>

³ According to Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project <http://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases/nov-2016/>

⁴ According to Borrell Associates, which tracks and forecasts ad spending <https://www.campaignsandelections.com/campaign-insider/digital-ad-spending-tops-estimates>

⁵ According to Bloomberg report: <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/graphics/2016-presidential-campaign-tv-ads/>

For anyone who cares about our political culture, or about Americans' (lack of, unequal) engagement with politics, national-level campaigns should be of central interest. Yet while there is a great deal of research into how and whether campaigns affect voters, vote choices, and election outcomes, we know remarkably little about the circumstances in which political advertisements, speeches, or field strategies are crafted. Campaign professionals—political consultants and others who make their living working in campaigns—create these campaign strategies, but there have been relatively few studies of this occupation.⁶ This article thus asks: how do campaign professionals understand their work, and how should we?

This might seem unnecessary; after all, there are countless published accounts of the internal dynamics and decision-making processes of the world of campaigns, from reports on the quadrennial forums hosted by The University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Center and Harvard University's Institute of Politics at its Kennedy School (Jamieson 2013, 2009; Institute of Politics 2017, 2013), to journalists' accounts (e.g. Issenberg 2012; Allen and Parnes 2017; Bai 2007), and reams of memoirs and manifestos by political consultants and campaign staff written after every election (e.g. Plouffe 2010; Axelrod 2016; Hillsman 2008; Rove 2010; Strother 2003; Luntz 2008). In all of these accounts, perhaps unsurprisingly, campaign decision-makers are depicted as political masterminds; maybe ones who occasionally make mistakes or do not have all the resources or information at hand that they would like, but nonetheless instrumentally rational and working

⁶ With some notable exceptions: James Thurber, David Dulio and their colleagues led a series of studies of political consultants and campaigns in the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. Thurber 1998; Thurber and Nelson 2000; Dulio 2004; Dulio and Nelson 2005); and more recently Kreiss (2016, 2012), Mahler (2011, 2006), Hersh (2015), Grossman (2009, 2009), Nielsen (2012).

ruthlessly and efficiently to convince a winning proportion of the electorate to turn out to vote for their candidate.

This is an appealing, intuitive, and not entirely wrong portrait of campaign professionals' approach to their work. However, if we believe campaign decision-makers are always and only aiming to maximize their campaigns' chances of winning, we are faced with a paradox: research often shows that campaign effects are uncertain, small, or non-existent and the consensus among political scientists who study campaigns, if there is one, seems to be that the effectiveness of any given campaign tactic is largely contingent on factors outside the campaigns' control (Vavreck 2009; Brady and Johnston 2006; Jacobson 2015; Erikson and Wlezien 2012). Moreover, the tactics campaigns choose are often wildly out of sync with political scientists' understanding of what does work: "mountains of rigorous research show that campaigns should be having personal conversations with voters at their doors. But, campaigns spend almost all their money on TV ads — and, every year, most voters say they've never had a conversation about the election at their door" (Broockman and Kalla 2014). How, then, do political operatives make sense of doing work that scholars often say is at best only marginally related to the outcome of elections, and what drives their approach to campaigning?

One possible explanation for campaigners' questionably-effective approaches, popular among journalists as well as critics of the quality of American democracy, holds that financial self-interest, at times even more than the desire to win, is behind campaign strategists' — especially consultants' — approach to campaigning (e.g. Armstrong and Moulitsas 2008; Sabato 1981). In a compelling history of the rise of the political consulting business, Sheingate (2016) makes this move explicitly, writing that "the financial incentives of consultants may explain why campaigns spend so much money on media and other professional services even when the evidence for their efficacy is

far from clear” (213). He also, however, describes much of the history of political consulting as a constant “search for more effective instruments of persuasion and more reliable sources of information about the attachments and affiliations of individual voters,” i.e., he makes the “mastermind” argument, too (Sheingate 2016, 201); these claims are unsurprisingly in some tension throughout the book.⁷

As I will show, although pecuniary incentives may affect some campaign decisions, this is not a sufficient account of professional political consulting or campaign work, and does not fully resolve the paradoxes above. Briefly, many if not most choices made by people who work on campaigns can have no direct impact on their own remuneration; and while the lion’s share of campaign *money* goes through political media firms, in most cases these firms and their principals are not the primary or only decision-makers involved in allocating campaign expenditures.

Another possible resolution to the tension between seeing campaign professionals as masterminds and the research showing the uncertainty of campaign effects is that campaign operatives know either far more or far less than political scientists do: that they are simply making decisions based on what they *believe* is most likely to achieve the “fifty percent plus one” result that guarantees victory in most American elections. This is to some extent the argument of *Prototype Politics* (Kreiss 2016): parties adopt new tactics when a consensus emerges that what they had been doing up to that point was insufficient. When they have reason to believe that their current approaches are working – either because they have recently won, or because their recent loss seemed shaped by factors outside their control – they do not seek out new technologies or innovations.

⁷ Specifically, Sheingate argues that consultants need wins to develop and maintain the reputations that will garner them clients; if this is the case their motive to stay in business to make profits ought to also move them towards the most effective possible strategies, but that is not what he sees happening.

However, along with almost all extant studies of political practitioners, this leaves unexamined the assumption that campaign workers' practices can be understood as always directly aimed at seeking electoral victory (or else as profit-motivated). This and other research does not yet account for how campaign professionals make sense of their own work, or how they judge the effectiveness of others' work. What is missing, I argue, is an understanding of political operatives as embedded in a field, or a world of work, that is distinctive, and whose goals are not reducible to either their financial or electoral incentives.

In this article, I show that professional campaign operatives are neither mercenaries nor masterminds: the ways in which their choices do not line up with what scholars might expect can be explained neither by their profit motives, nor by their superior (or inferior) analysis of campaigns (though all these also exist). Despite the assumptions of most research on their world up to this point, they generally do not see their own decision-making processes, or the pathways to success in their field, as being solely about the calculation of probable paths to electoral victory.

Instead, while professional campaigners' *public* accounts of their actions during campaigns often emphasize the sophisticated knowledge and tools they possess and the profound impact their work can have on campaigns, in off-the-record interviews they told me that they are often much less certain about how, when, and even whether any decision they make will have an impact on an ultimate electoral outcome. Outside of a the public eye, they in fact agree with, and sometimes even cite, research on the minimal, mixed, and contingent nature of campaign effects (e.g. Iyengar and Simon 2000; Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007; Brady and Johnston 2006; Vavreck 2009). I argue that we need to understand campaign professionals in the way sociology has come to understand many kinds of work, as a field where internally-valued norms and goals hold at least as much power over participants as externally measurable outcomes such as wins or earnings (e.g. Krause 2018; Fligstein

and McAdam 2012; Bourdieu 1993); this is a much better match to their own understanding of their work than alternate approaches, and also a better explanation for the observed disjuncture between campaigns' choices and research on campaign effects.

This article thus both contributes to political scientists' and sociologists' understanding of the creation of a key aspect of American politics, and provides evidence that the insights of the sociology of cultural production apply well outside of what is normally thought of as "culture."

Understanding American National-Level Campaigns

Campaigns are not only attempts to achieve a goal—winning an election—they are also workplaces for campaign staff, clients for political consultants, and the production site for enormous quantities of political messaging. Although each national-level campaign is conducted by a relatively short-lived "campaign assemblage" (Nielsen 2012) of the campaign committee and its party and partisan allies, there is a great deal of consistency in how campaigns are conducted, as shown in both prescriptive (e.g. Faucheux 2003; McNamara 2008; Shaw 2004; Shea and Burton 2006) and descriptive (e.g. Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1997) accounts of campaigning.

In the United States over the past half-century, political campaigns have become increasingly formalized and professionalized (though Kreiss 2012 argues that the digital/tech/new media sphere is largely populated with newer entrants to the political world). Through the middle of the 20th century, political parties made most campaign decisions—choosing candidates, providing staff, and making strategic decisions (Crotty and Jacobson 1980; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Now, the "candidate-centered" campaign has replaced the party-run campaign (e.g. Crotty and Jacobson 1980; Sabato 1988; Katz and Mair 1995; Wattenberg 1998; Farrell and Webb 2000). Skocpol (2003; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999) identified this as the "professionalization" of politics—the shift from

associational organizations to professionally staffed ones—in every aspect of politics⁸. Where campaigning used to be an occasional activity for people whose main careers were either in party organizations or outside politics entirely, in the US it is now a full-time, year-round occupation for thousands of people (D. W. Johnson 2001; Dulio 2004). Sheingate (2016) estimates that at least 3.5 billion dollars out of the estimated 6 billion spent in the 2012 campaign went to consulting firms (though much of that sum went right back out again in the form of paid television advertising).

Up to recently, studies of the people behind campaigns have focused almost entirely on political consultants, who provide services to political campaigns without being their employees, often working on many races simultaneously (Medvic 2003; Mancini 1999; Petracca 1989; Dulio 2004; Panagopoulos, Dulio, and Brewer 2011; Medvic 2001; Farrell, Kolodny, and Medvic 2001). Much of the early work on consultants was deeply concerned about their effects on elections and American democracy more broadly; it blamed the shift from what were understood as party-centered and -organized campaigns to candidate-centered campaigns on the rise of the consulting industry, and worried that consultants' (presumed) focus on maximizing the chances of winning for their candidate might come at the expense of broader partisan interests, that their sophisticated techniques would manipulate a credulous public, and/or that they would prioritize their financial interests even over the interests of their clients (e.g. Rosenbloom 1973; Sabato 1981; D. W. Johnson 2001).

⁸ While Grossman (2009) and Kreiss (2012) have argued that the professionalization of politics is in process or incomplete, at the level of top decision-makers in national-level campaigns, nearly everyone – even many key Trump operatives – has been a full-time political professional working with major parties and candidates for years if not decades.

More recent work has argued that consultants and campaign and party staff should all be thought of as part of an extended party network (Bernstein and Dominguez 2003; Bernstein 1999; Francia and Herrnson 2007; Montgomery and Nyhan 2010; Skinner, Masket, and Dulio 2012; Nyhan and Montgomery 2015), that consultants are partisans who collaborate with parties and provide resources parties might not have, rather than competitors to parties. This dynamic is illustrated extensively in Kreiss' work on the adoption and diffusion of new media and data analytic approaches (2016, 2012) in the Democratic and Republican parties, and in the case of the collaboration between private vendors and the Democratic party to maintain and provide access to voter databases described by Hersh (2015). Earlier work also made clear that contemporary consultants work with the parties during elections (Kolodny and Dulio 2003; Kolodny and Logan 1998; Thurber and Nelson 2000, 2004) and are not that different from party operatives in their reports of their motivations (Dulio 2004) or approach to campaigning (Dulio and Nelson 2005).

Beyond this, however, focusing exclusively on consultants to understand contemporary American national campaigns ignores key players in campaigns. Most national campaigns for elected office have both consultants and regular staff devising and implementing campaign strategies (Thurber and Nelson 2000). Campaign staff and consultants are also drawn from the same pool: many campaign staff told me they aim to "hang out a shingle" of their own one day, and most consultants are former campaign staff; some consultants even shift back to being full-time campaign employees to work on presidential races (my analysis, Campaign Careers dataset and Thurber, Nelson, and Dulio 1999). Although Sheingate (2016) argues that consultants have a near-monopoly on campaign decision-making, my own work along with others' indicates this is an oversimplification; many key decision-makers in campaigns do not have their own consulting businesses, such as those involved as spokespeople and speechwriters or managing field operations.

A more recent set of studies does look inside the campaigns, and not only at consultants (Hersh 2015; Kreiss 2012; Nielsen 2012; Kreiss 2016; Mahler 2006, 2011). Much of this work underlines the uncertain nature of campaign effects: Hersh shows how voter targeting based on consumer data is generally far less effective than its proponents would like to believe; Nielsen shows how actual door-to-door canvasses end up looking far different from the scripts crafted by campaign higher-ups.

Campaign staff and consultants craft all forms of political messaging aimed at potential voters, and determine which citizens will be targeted and contacted by campaigns in the first place. The vast majority of activities campaigns engage in are decided upon, created, and implemented by professional campaign staff and political consultants hired specifically for that purpose. “Politicos,” as they often call themselves, shape a candidate’s message, her self-presentation, and her daily schedule throughout the campaign. In short, their role in campaigns, and thus in the communication between potential voters and current and future holders of the power of elected offices, is hard to overstate. Politicos contribute enormously to the form and content of American politics.

Understanding Work-Worlds: Fields and Organizations

While political scientists and those in adjacent disciplines often treat campaigns as collections of instrumentally rational actors engaged either in maximizing their profits or in maximizing their chances of winning, sociologists have long questioned whether assumptions of utility-maximization can capture what motivates people in a variety of social settings, including workplaces and professions. Instead, we often talk about arenas of work as fields – sets of actors and organizations who are in conversation or competition with each other and who share a similar understanding of the meaning, boundaries, and rules of their work-world.

Networks of people involved in national-level political campaigns can be fruitfully understood through this lens, as part of a field of cultural production. There are at least three strands of literature on cultural production and fields worth bringing to bear: Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1983, 1993, 1996), the “production of culture” perspective (e.g. Hirsch 1972, 2000; Peterson and Anand 2004), and the sociology of work and occupations and neo-institutional theory (e.g. Fligstein and McAdam 2012; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Abbott 1988). There is also a rich thread of recent work using these approaches to think about political topics (e.g. Medvetz 2007, 2006; Krause 2014; Mudge and Vauchez 2012; Lebaron 2008). These approaches highlight two aspects of cultural production that are essential for understanding American political campaigns. The first is that all work is done by individuals embedded in organizations and fields which have their own standards, values, and criteria for career advancement. What is valued or considered good or high-quality within a particular field may have little or nothing to do with what matters to (most) outsiders. This is made abundantly clear in the relations between artists and their patrons described in *The Rules of Art* (1996) and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), for example when “pure” artists hold “bourgeois” consumers in contempt, and position themselves in opposition to those who produce for the wealthy or for the masses. If political production is itself a field or becoming a field, then it makes sense that campaigners judge their own and others’ products and decisions by criteria that (unlike both winning and earning money) are not necessarily visible to those outside the field.

The second insight from studies of cultural production is that cultural producers (not just writers or artists, but all those involved in selecting, curating, and promoting cultural objects), especially those producing for a “mass” audience, are almost always working amidst a great deal of uncertainty about which particular book, TV show, or movie will be a “hit” with those inside or outside the field (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Faulkner and Anderson 1987). Agents within fields

develop different types of strategies for dealing with this uncertainty, depending in part on the structure of the field, the costs of production, and their particular position: some publishing houses instituted quotas for editors in hopes that publishing *enough* books would increase the odds that *one* or more would be successful (Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 1982); another strategy is simply trying to repeat past successes with small innovations, as has been observed in the TV field (Gitlin 2000) as well as the literary one (Escarpit and Pick 1971).

In what follows (after explaining my methods), I describe how political professionals told me *they* understand their work and its effects: although they value winning and are happy to earn money, they see themselves neither as masterminds nor as mercenaries. Instead, their campaign-related decision-making is often as much about responding to the expectations of others in their field as it is about calculating the likely effect of their work on either electoral outcomes or their own pocketbooks.

Data & Methods

This article is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2009-2010 and in 2017, with 67 current and former national-level (Presidential or Senatorial) campaign staff and consultants who had been involved in making decisions about campaign strategy, messaging, or outreach; twelve people were interviewed in both periods for a total of 79 interviews. I also draw on four months as a full-time volunteer with a presidential campaign and attendance at over 60 hours of trainings and conferences for campaign workers and political consultants. Complete descriptions of each of these data sources, as well as additional information on recruitment of interviewees and my analytic strategy are included in a methodological appendix.

In recruiting and selecting interviewees I aimed to include respondents who had been in positions to make significant decisions about strategy or tactics in high-level American electoral campaigns, from both parties, and in all the specialties within campaigning which involve some form of communication with potential voters. I generated lists of potential interviewees from a website cataloging the paid staff and consultants of every Presidential candidate in 2004, 2008 and 2016,⁹ candidates' websites, news reports listing key staffers in competitive Senate races, and profiles of "rising stars" in the campaign world published in *Campaigns & Elections* magazine.

Through a combination of cold-contacts, my own networks, and snowball sampling, I interviewed as wide a variety of people working full-time in national-level campaigns as I could. This is of course not a randomly generated sample of political professionals, so it is not possible to make formal inferences about the population of political professionals. Nonetheless I have a number of reasons to believe that my interviewees were not substantially different from other political professionals in terms of the way they understood their work. First, I had a fairly high rate of response to my requests for interviews: of 247 contacts I made, 55% agreed at some point to be interviewed, though I did not ultimately conduct interviews with all of them. Second, my interviewees represented nearly all types of campaign professionals, including both consultants and campaign staff who had worked at all levels of national campaigns' hierarchies, as field directors, fundraisers, pollsters, spokespeople and campaign managers, and in political, new media, communications, and most other campaign departments and consulting fields. Third, they were not very different from the field as a whole in terms of the attributes I can identify. There were 31

⁹ <http://www.democracyinaction.us/> by Eric M. Appleman, which includes a site for each Presidential election since 2000, e.g. <http://www.p2016.org/>

Republicans, 35 Democrats, and one Independent, ranging in age at the time of the interviews from 24 to 73; most were in their 30s or 40s. They had between one and over 45 years' experience in politics; six had moved to working entirely in the non-profit or corporate sectors when I interviewed them in 2017. Fifty-two were men and 15 women, which represents a about the same proportion of women as are in the field overall¹⁰; all but four of my interviewees were white, which is also approximately representative of the top levels of the field as a whole. Interviewees' pseudonymous initials and other non-identifying attributes are listed in the Methodological Appendix.

After assuring respondents that their responses would not be identifiably attributed to them in any published work, I started each interview in both time periods with general questions about how people become successful in the world of political campaigns. I followed up with specific prompts about people they thought were particularly good or bad and why, how they had made hiring decisions if they had been in positions to do so, and what they thought made for the most effective or best campaign strategies, especially in their specialty. In the last third of each interview (except for the 12 repeat interviews) I asked about interviewees' background and career trajectory. I ended each interview by asking if there was anything I had not covered that they wanted me to know, and then asking for suggestions for other people to interview. In 2017 interviews I also asked how they understood the 2016 Presidential election, and asked more explicitly about some of the conclusions I had drawn from the earlier interviews.

To analyze my interviews and observations, I used a mix of inductive and deductive coding in Atlas.ti. I started by simply coding interview topics, such as descriptions of good or bad campaign

¹⁰ Based on comparison to my original dataset, where 67% are men.

operatives; as themes emerged (e.g. uncertainty about campaign effects) I began searching for and coding instances of these themes. Quotations included in the text have been edited for concision, including removal of filler words when this does not take away from the meaning. I am reasonably confident that my interviewees told me honestly how they believe campaigning works, for two reasons: first, because their reports fit with my own observations and experiences in campaigns; second, because many of them told me things that put their work in an unflattering light, and that could hurt their careers if made public, often explicitly checking in about our confidentiality agreement after saying something critical about their peers or their profession.

Not Mercenaries

Although few contemporary scholars argue that campaign professionals are driven entirely by their financial interests, there is recurring concern with the amount of money going into campaigns, and the ways in which that might corrupt or otherwise alter the process. This is not an unreasonable concern – there *is* a lot of money in politics, changes in campaign finance laws mean more and more money is available to Presidential and other national-level campaigns, and campaigns each cycle generally spend more than the last (except Trump's). However, while the *amount* of money available to campaigns clearly affects any number of decisions they might make, from how many staff to hire to how much to spend on television advertising, particular campaigners' desires to earn more money do not in fact influence most campaign decisions. I would not argue that no campaigner has ever made a decision designed primarily to line their own pocketbook, but the profit motive is a poor way to understand the vast majority of what happens in campaigns. I have two points to support this claim: the first has to do with how many decisions *can* influence the earnings

of political operatives (not many can for any politico; for many politicians, none); the second has to do with politicians' motivations generally (money is really not their biggest concern).

To take the first point, most of the people working on campaigns are paid salaries as staff members, not fees as consultants, so none of their decisions – unless they prolong or shorten the campaign itself – will affect their income. For consultants, there are two main types of decisions that can increase their earnings. First, consultants and campaign staff may choose to work for campaigns or candidates whose values they do not fully share, or whose chances for winning are very slight (or essentially guaranteed), simply because each additional campaign or client generates additional income. Sheingate (2016) is concerned that the most powerful consultants might prefer to work primarily with incumbents to maintain a good win-loss ratio and thereby the reputation they need to continue gaining clients. Less prominent consultants might have fewer choices, which might mean the races who need good consultants the most are left with the less-experienced or less successful advisors (Sheingate 2016, 215; there is some evidence of this in Martin and Peskowitz 2015, 2018).

When I asked consultants about how they picked their clients, they absolutely wanted to have enough clients to keep their businesses running, and some could therefore not be very picky. Many of the more prominent or successful staff, consultants and firms were able to be more selective, though, about the clients they worked for and the campaigns they joined. For example, one told me

And in the case of our firm, for example, we will not work for anybody. And we don't ask people to run around with a Scarlet A on their forehead, but we don't work for anti-choice candidates, we don't work for anti-labor candidates, we don't work for anti-LGBT candidates. We work disproportionately for challengers and women and people of color and liberals. So that is going to diminish your win-loss ratio to begin with. And we're not trying to make the

most money; if you want to make the most money, you usually have a pretty good corporate practice. And we don't have a corporate practice.

Moreover, consultants whose firms provide services do earn based on the amount of services they provide, so they do have a pecuniary incentive to advocate for as large a share as possible of the campaign's budget going to their specialty area, whether that is polling, TV advertising, online outreach, data analytics, mail, telephones, or something else (field operations are usually handled by salaried staff, not consultants). The fact that the lion's share of campaign expenditure is on television, despite the perception of many campaigners and observers that broadcast television may be declining in its effectiveness, may be due in part to television buyers' interest in this continuing, as Sheingate suspects, but the content is not. Moreover, once the money has been allocated – a decision normally made by the campaign manager, not the consultants themselves – there are few monetary repercussions to any further decision that might be made, because different choices about *content* of a TV ad or mailer or phone call all have costs that are about the same.

To take the second point, most people involved in politics are less concerned with earning money than with other kinds of rewards. Almost all of my interviewees (62 out of the 67) began their careers in politics by working as volunteers or for very little money because they wanted to affect political outcomes; none told me they were motivated to get into political work for the money. This is consistent with the 1999 survey of political consultants, in which less than 10% reported they entered political consulting to make money (Thurber, Nelson, and Dulio 1999).

Of the people with whom I directly discussed income, only two told me that money played any role in their decision-making; both of these were frustrated with work in politics but stayed because the money was better than the alternatives they saw. No one, however, reported making particular decisions to earn more in a given campaign – though they did tell me about many other

aspects of their work that they thought were uncomplimentary (see below). In fact, a number of respondents explicitly told me they stayed in politics despite their ability to make more money elsewhere.

Others reported making decisions or suggestions that were in fact counter to their economic interest. For example, a consultant who provided phone-contact services for campaigns [STM] told me “I will be, like, ‘Hey, you know, don’t do phones here,’ or ‘I think we should do more mail’ or something like that.”

Finally, at least three of the political professionals I interviewed told me the one thing they’d change about campaigns would be to *reduce* the amount of money involved, even if it would harm their bottom line. They all thought a lot of funds were going to waste on saturating television advertising or exorbitant online ad buys of limited effectiveness.

None of this is meant to imply that money doesn’t matter at all in politics, or that political professionals are unconcerned with money; money clearly matters, but it is not the main consideration for most campaign professionals’ approaches to their work in politics.

So the mercenary explanation for campaigns’ decision-making is relatively easy to dispense with, but the claim that political professionals are masters at using some combination of their finely honed political instincts and carefully analyzed data from polls to figure out what will move the largest possible portion of the electorate to come out to vote for their candidate is a bit more complicated to address.

Not Masterminds: Uncertainty and Politics

It might seem like political campaigns have a clear, external mechanism for gauging their effectiveness—whether the election is won or lost. Recent advances in data mining and large-scale

data analytics have certainly made larger portions of the electorate more knowable to campaigns, as have sophisticated approaches to modeling voter behavior (e.g. Issenberg 2012). But this sort of claim – that advances in technology and/or the rise of an occupation specializing in campaigning allow campaigns to effectively manipulate voters to do their bidding – is one that political operatives have been making about themselves, and concerned or impressed journalists and academics have been echoing, for over 40 years (going back at least to Rosenbloom 1973). While the tools have undoubtedly improved, the fundamental impossibility of perfectly predicting or influencing future human behavior remains. Eitan Hersh makes this point in his in-depth examination of Democrats’ use of their campaign databases; even with the most sophisticated tools yet available, campaigns only have access to “predicted voters” not actual voters, and campaigns frequently get even race, party, and persuadability wrong (Hersh 2015, 22). Anyone who has made calls or canvassed for a political campaign in the last five years can attest, as Nielsen (2012) describes, to the inconsistent accuracy of call sheets and walk lists.

The depiction of campaign professionals – especially those who have recently won major contested races – as “masterminds” is common in journalistic accounts of campaigns, as well in many political professionals’ own accounts of their work. Many scholarly accounts of campaigns also take for granted that campaign strategists are simply motivated by winning as many campaigns for their party as possible, and expertly marshalling the resources at their disposal to maximize the chance that their party will win. This is not *entirely* wrong, except that no one knows for sure what will “maximize the chances that their party will win.”

Indeed, almost all my interviewees demonstrated some uncertainty about the impact of their work: only ten consistently said that their efforts in a campaign could determine the outcome of an election. Seven people talked about winning and losing campaigns as solely based on factors outside

their control; L.U.K. told me, for example, that he feels like whether a candidate wins or not is “ninety percent luck” – then immediately reminded me not to attribute that quote to him. The remaining 53 interviewees were tentative, ambivalent and/or contradictory in their accounts of the relationship between campaign efforts and outcomes.

Interviewees’ perspectives on this issue often shifted as they talked about different aspects of campaign work: many conveyed that they believed *both* that campaigns do influence election outcomes, *and* that they have little or no impact, at different points in our conversations. For example, H.A.T, a Republican who was recognized as a “rising star” by the campaign industry magazine, told me that professional consultant-staffed campaigns almost always beat campaigns using mostly volunteers or those from outside politics (which is generally true: D. W. Johnson 2001). I asked what determines who wins when both campaigns have professionals, and he said something many others echoed:

I would like to tell you that it’s the consultants can make the race. [...] but at the end of the day it really comes down to which candidate naturally resonates—something that you can’t fake. [...] But consultants are always wanting to take credit for it. [...] the way that the race closes and the definition of momentum is out of our control. And sometimes candidates that lose, who were supposed to win, because they said or did something stupid [...] that’s outside of our control.

But a few minutes later in our conversation, now talking about a race he was working on at the time, he also told me his skills and expertise did indeed matter:

At the end of the day, if we win, it will definitely be because we had the superior strategy and we were able to fully take advantage of the environment.

Most interviewees at some point said that factors outside their control generally mattered as much as or more than what they could do. These were most often the candidate and his or her ability to “resonate,” the “environment” (whether it was likely to be a good election for their party overall), and, simply, luck. This was not just excuse-making by people who had recently lost; T.S.K., whom I interviewed in June of 2010 when she was working in a post in the Obama administration after working in field operations in Obama’s 2008 campaign, told me her reactions as she was reading David Plouffe’s account of the campaign (Plouffe 2010): “Oh, gosh, right, that happened, that was bad and like that happened and that was bad [...] how did we win? Just kept on messing up.”

Politicos are not confused about their work: these shifting accounts are compatible with a coherent perspective on how and when campaigns matter. Based on my interviews and observations, I think few politicians would disagree (at least off the record) with a summary along the lines of “in close races, or with some luck, our work can make the difference, but most of the time other factors matter more than anything a campaign can do.”

This view is entirely in line with research that shows that campaigns generally have only small, if any, effects on election outcomes. A host of models forecast election results with no consideration of the quality of the campaign or the candidate (e.g. Campbell 1996; Leigh and Wolfers 2006; Abramowitz 2016; Campbell 2016; Erikson and Wlezien 2016). Further, individual voting behavior may be affected by any number of factors far outside campaigns’ control, possibly including even the local weather (Gomez, Hansford, and Krause 2007) or the outcomes of football games (Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010). Mass campaign communications at the Presidential level (aside from conventions) rarely change many voters’ minds or determine election outcomes (Gerber et al. 2011; Iyengar and Simon 2000; Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007; Jacobson 2015; Erikson and

Wlezien 2012) (but see Brader 2005; Franz and Ridout 2010). Campaigns may affect outcomes through helping voters connect macro-level concerns such as the state of the economy to particular vote choices (Vavreck 2009; Jacobson 2015; Sides and Vavreck 2013). But part of the reason most campaigns have little or no measurable effects on outcomes may be that their efforts are counterbalanced by opposing campaigns (Jacobson 2015); as L.U.A. explained, “it’s an arms race, you know? It’s mutually assured destruction. You’ve got to build up your arsenal and they’re gonna build it up to match.”

Campaign Uncertainty and Evaluation

This uncertainty—among practitioners and scholars alike—around campaign effects means that it is also very difficult to tell which aspects of a campaign strategy, let alone which campaign professionals, contribute to electoral outcomes. There is a clear result for (almost) every race—a win or a loss—but it is exceedingly rare that campaigners can retroactively, let alone contemporaneously, know who or what, inside or outside the campaign, led to that outcome. While most people I spoke with in 2017 had some ideas about what the Clinton campaign could have done differently, A.W.H., a senior Republican pollster, was fairly typical when he told me, about her slogan:

Stronger together for what was never very clear. Would that have made the difference? Who the hell knows? Nobody knows. And those folks who are out there telling you they know this factor would have changed the outcome are blowing smoke, they’re carnival barkers, because they don’t know either. You can make a compelling argument for a number of things. And when it’s this close you can make a compelling argument for almost anything.

I asked G.E.J. how someone outside the world of campaigns could tell who was good, and he tied together the difficulty of assessing quality with the randomness of many campaign outcomes:

It's just circumstances. [For example] James Carville [was] always on these losing campaigns, but was he bad then? No. You know, he was always a very capable guy; he just had bad luck and because you're going to lose most of the time in politics unless you're running incumbent stuff—you're gonna lose.

When I asked how interviewees assess other politicians' campaign capabilities, the most common answers by far were variations of "it's hard to quantify." This is a typical statement, from a Democrat with over 30 years in politics (B.O.T.):

it's not like there's someplace you can go easily and see, well, who's won more of the tough races, right? Because you could maybe find through Campaigns & Elections Magazine a win-loss record, and you could start to compile that. But then, like I said, you'd have to control for someone might win a ton of races, but they're just doing a lot of safe candidates. Or the opposite, because they tend to take a lot of long-shots. That doesn't mean anything. So, it would be impossible to know.

Q.U.M. even suggested hopefully that my research might provide her and other Republicans with a system to "keep track of [...] good campaign managers."

Because it is so difficult to know which individuals or strategies (if any) caused a campaign to win (or lose), everyone involved with the campaign is often accorded credit for a win or blame for a loss. For example, S.T.M. told me: "all you need is one big win. You could have fucked up everything. I mean, we could suck, but if [our Senate candidate this cycle] wins, we're gonna look golden. Even if we had nothin' to do with it." And B.E.M explained:

if you were a Democrat working on a campaign in 2006, 2008, you could have been sub-par and still look like a genius. On the Republican side, you could have been a genius and looked like a fool. And [in 2010], I think it's probably flipped where there's probably a lot of sub-par Republican operatives that are

gonna look great, because the tidal wave is going to carry them across the finish line.

Even the seemingly purely objective or scientific aspects of campaigns, such as polling and targeting, are based on practitioners' acquired, practical sense as much as or more than they are based anything that rises to the standards of social science. Many of my interviewees, in describing these sorts of work, made this explicit in a way they would not when promoting themselves to potential clients or to journalists reporting on their work. For example, C.A.M. described the specific message-targeting he thought necessary: "There's Latino, non-college men 30 to 40 in suburban Albuquerque with families, blue collar—that's an audience." I asked "so, there's a lot of research that goes into that?" but he admitted "most people we work for don't have the cash to do the research. So they basically got to intuit it. Deduce and intuit it."

Hersh's (2015) work also challenges much recent touting of the analytic power of voter databases and the supposedly sophisticated analytics they enable. While it is true that the Democrats have a voter file with nearly 700 possible variables for each member of the electorate (as well as a number of people who are not even registered to vote), most of these variables are poor predictors of politically relevant attitudes and attributes; in states where partisanship is not asked on registration forms, Hersh estimates that only about 2/3rds of those a campaign might identify as likely Democrats based on other attributes would actually vote for the Democrat (119).

Although journalistic narratives of campaigns frequently identify decisive tactics or moments in campaigns, these sorts of accounts are usually inaccurate or, at best, unverifiable. The most comprehensive research to date on campaign timelines shows most campaign events which are contemporaneously or retroactively hailed as "game-changers" have little lasting impact on potential voters' actions (Erikson and Wlezien 2012). Moreover, it is almost never the case that the effect of a particular campaign moment could be knowable in advance. Campaigners are thus uncertain about

how, whether, and which campaign strategies affect election outcomes, and aware of the difficulty of assessing individual political acumen. Given this uncertainty, campaigners cannot simply match their tactics to predictable effects.

Despite claims made publicly about the power of new approaches to data in campaigns, the uncertainty campaigners face is, for the most part, unresolvable. Even polling cannot reliably identify the effects of campaign efforts, separate from other factors outside campaigns' control. While some campaigns have begun using experimental designs for some of their communication with voters (Issenberg 2012), these are still not very common, and more importantly most aspects of a campaign cannot be subject to experimentation during the campaign.

So how do they do their work? Fields of Cultural Production

So campaigners can't be understood as either mercenaries or masterminds. Instead, they operate in what should be understood as the *field of political production*. My interviews and observations provide strong evidence that this is a good way to understand campaigns. Although the production of political campaign messages undoubtedly differs in important ways from the production of television, art, or music, they have important elements in common.

First, one key aspect of fields is that what people value inside a field is not necessarily the same thing as what is valued in other fields. In campaigns, the ultimate indicator of status, and therefore most people's goal for themselves, was not title, pay, or even the contribution of winning ideas; it was getting to be "at the table" when key strategic decisions are made. This, more even than winning the upcoming election, was what my interviewees said motivated them. Two of my informants told stories of turning down campaign jobs because they would not have had sufficient access to the inner/upper echelons of the campaign offering the job. One chose to work instead for

a candidate whom he liked less and who had less chance of winning (but who offered a position in the “inner circle” of the campaign); another told me he would have taken a job for a trade association rather than work in a position he considered insufficiently central to the campaign organization (but, after refusing less prestigious positions, was offered and accepted a role at the national level). Most of my interviewees (and I experienced this myself when I worked on a campaign) valued being someone who participated in shaping overall campaign strategy, who was “in the room” or “in the inner circle” of whatever campaign they were on.

Next, in all these fields, the perspective of peers and competitors – other “players” in one’s field or game – are of central importance. When I asked what made for good, high-quality, or effective work in their specialty, politicians described approaching campaign strategies largely from the perspective of the anticipated responses of their colleagues or opponents; they had relatively little to say about how their work affected potential voters. This makes sense: while it is difficult if not impossible to know how most campaign tactics will be received by voters, it is fairly easy for politicians to find out whether and how an opposing campaign responds, and both easy and important for their career success to know what colleagues think of their campaign tactics.

Many respondents described campaign effectiveness directly in terms of their responses to the opposition. For example, H.A.T. told me, “when you’re facing off against a team of equally experienced consultants, there’s more strategy, it’s more complex, you play a better game overall.” G.E.D. told me successful campaigners were the ones who “go to war when they’re on the field or on the basketball court,” who approach a campaign with an attitude of “my goal is to get my guy elected and destroy the other guy; everything else doesn’t matter.” Mahler’s (2006, 2011) ethnographic accounts of campaigning also illustrate this point: most of the strategy sessions he

reports, as well as a good deal of the emotional energy in the campaign office, are focused on either the opponent's campaign or the media.

Moreover, the ways in which politicians described evaluating campaign quality fit this approach as well: since they mostly cannot assess each other's work by objective measurements of its effects on campaign outcomes, they rely instead on an acquired, largely implicit sense of what constitutes good campaigning. Most said things like "you just know it when you see it" and that their assessments were largely about "political instincts" or based on their "gut sense" of politics. C.H.M., a Democratic woman who had worked in politics for 10 years, told me about looking at a campaign ad with someone she saw as having "a tin ear for this stuff":

[...] we just had totally different reactions. [...] and I thought the ad was stale, old but equaling stale, like out of touch. And this person thought it was establishment, a powerbroker, whatever, and I just thought that that didn't resonate with where the electorate was at. [...] Now, there's no way to evaluate who's right and who's wrong, but I felt like he was off.

Many interviewees believed that following conventional campaign wisdom was essential to their career success, whether or not it was actually good for a *campaign's* success. For example, F.L.E. explained:

The thing I personally find most interesting about political consulting is the power of conventional wisdom [...]. Basically the way the incentives end up working is that in that sort of small world of people going back and forth between party committees and consulting firms, there's basically less risk in losing, using the conventional strategy that everybody would have used than trying something that actually might work to win. Yeah. Like, if you win that way, I suppose you're probably fine, but if you lose that way, you're like—there's some danger of being sort of kicked out of the circle.

I heard about the dominance of “conventional wisdom” from a majority of my interviewees: B.O.T. said there are many “people who just say something because, you know, that’s the way we always do things. Your ‘I know and don’t question it.’” K.E.J. explained that “when you’ve been doing this for as long as I have, and you’re inside the beltway, you tend to sort of just—it’s all group think.”

Another way in which political campaigns operate like other forms of cultural production is the prevalence of trends and fads in approaches to campaigns. A number of my interviewees made this point to me. One told me, essentially, that the campaigns field has cycles where “geeks” and their data-analytic approaches are ascendant (as they were when we spoke in 2010) or dominant (as they were through the 2010 election), and cycles that are all about the “gurus” and a more holistic, “instinct-driven” approach to campaign strategy (many interviewees in 2017 expected a shift towards “gurus” after the heavily geek-driven Clinton campaign failed to win the electoral college).

Younger generations of political operatives latch on to new techniques that they believe are more effective, but even approaches that have been decisively shown to be effective take a while to gain steam, while things that may be less effective stick around or even continue to gain followers. For example, as Daniel Kreiss makes clear in his careful research on the diffusion of “new media” strategies in Democratic campaigns (2012), innovation is not as simple as automatic or predictable adoption of emerging technologies. Another story of campaigners’ reluctance to adopt new strategies, even those with a great deal of social science evidence behind them, is told in the journalistic account of the attempts of some politicians to introduce data-driven techniques into campaigning (Issenberg 2012).

These accounts, as well as numerous stories my interviewees told me, show that new techniques are only adopted when they are championed by people who are already seen as insiders,

and only diffuse if they are seen as being associated with wins (whether or not they actually affected outcomes). For example, “micro-targeting” was the hot campaign trend after it was associated with George W. Bush’s re-election victory, and “new media” and extensive ground campaigning were both increasingly popular after the Obama campaign of 2008. But there are just as many potential innovations that are never adopted, that could be just as (or more) likely to be effective at reaching and mobilizing voters. Campaigns must always try to have, and at least as importantly be seen as having, the latest and “best” campaigning techniques—but what exactly is considered to be the best is much more about the views of people inside politics than it is about objective likelihoods of affecting voters or increasing the chances of winning.

While Grossman (2009) finds political consulting does not meet the usual tests of being a full *profession*, many if not all aspects of the campaign world indicate that it can be usefully thought of as a field (Bourdieu 1991). Rather than being primarily an enterprise of connecting with potentially supportive voters, campaigns are largely competitions between those already in this field of political production, for positions within campaigns, and against other campaigns. The characteristics of work in campaigns outlined above indicate the ways electoral production is autonomous from market, academic, or other logics. Campaigns are thus in many ways more like other fields of cultural production—such as film, music, television and literature (Bielby and Bielby 1994; Escarpit and Pick 1971; Baker and Faulkner 1991; Bourdieu 1996, 1993)—than they are the arenas of rational strategic calculation imagined by many who study politics.

A number of people who work full time in campaigns, in fact, made explicit comparisons between their work and other kinds of cultural production. M.A.K told me:

[...] campaigning and reaching audiences is a craft, much the way that people who produce TV shows are always looking for the new kind of “Lost.” People

who produce movies are always looking for the new kind of “Shrek.” People who make technology are always looking for the new iPad.

While he may have been thinking about the mass-market appeal of each of those items, the analogy actually goes further: the production of each of those hot “new things” is always as much a story about the judgments and organizations of people in Hollywood, or Silicon Valley, or New York, as about the tastes of the mass of consumers, let alone the profit motives of their designers (Gitlin 2000; Peterson and Anand 2004). Just like films, even mass-market ones, respond to trends and ideas within Hollywood about what makes for “good” or “big” films (Baker and Faulkner 1991), the strategies and tactics of campaigns—from speeches to mailers to new micro-targeting strategies—are about what is happening *inside* the field as much as or more than what, objectively, influences voters.

None of this is to say, of course, that campaigns’ strategies are entirely unrelated to communicating with or mobilizing voters; many campaign tactics certainly make some difference to individual voters, as well as to election outcomes. Moreover, as one of my interviewees pointed out, it is absolutely not the case that either side in an election could just stop campaigning and let the partisan makeup of the electorate or the state of the economy determine the outcome—any candidate who didn’t campaign would almost certainly lose to one who did. (However, the Trump victory makes clear that campaigning the way experts think is best is not always essential for success.) Still, given two sides with professional campaign teams, most political operatives I talked with, and most of political science, agree that campaigns rarely produce election outcomes that were not predictable from non-campaign factors.

Conclusion

The picture of campaigning painted in the trainings and conferences I attended (and in journalistic accounts of campaigns) is one of largely rational, informed experts confidently plotting the best course given all available knowledge. While campaigners know a great deal about campaigning, much of this knowledge is received wisdom and imitation of what others have done, often expressed as a “gut sense” for the best strategy. Most of my interviewees agreed that even with the best possible data, few key decisions in campaigns can be made on the basis of available data alone. Even when political producers suspect that the usual course of action may not actually be the most effective technique, they are constrained by their sense that the field will not reward excessive innovation.

I have shown here that what we see in campaigns is not primarily the outcome of campaign decision-makers’ understanding of what moves voters. Campaign output cannot be understood by speculating about political operatives’ motivations in the abstract. Instead, campaigns’ output is created within a field of competition for positions. Individual politicians want to be “at the table” on the next campaign, and, if they are consultants, to drum up business. In order to succeed in this field, they need to be perceived as having good “political instincts,” which largely means following or modestly improving on prevailing practices, without directly acknowledging that that is what they are doing.

Political sociologists and political scientists pay great attention to questions of how individuals relate to politics—their positions on issues, beliefs about democracy and government, and how and why they vote or abstain. All these political opinions and behaviors are necessarily responses to the actual politics on offer, much of which is produced in campaigns (Bourdieu 1984). And campaigns are not the result of simple applications of data analysis and execution. Certainly the internal dynamics of the campaign field are not the only reason campaigns look the way they do, but

if we want to understand the production of American politics fully, we need to understand the actual work worlds and careers of the people who create campaigns. These factors are a key part of the story, one that has been left out by most extant studies of campaigns and voters.

Most of my interviewees had some criticism of the ways politics work. A substantial minority of my respondents were concerned about the ways that the campaign field evaluates politicians and political output. G.E.D put it most clearly:

[...] what [hiring people based on reputations] does is it breeds institutionalized mentalities and perpetuates this formulaic thinking, which I think is one of the death knells and why people hate politics, is again, it's this recycling of the same bullshit rhetoric on both sides and it's incredibly stifling to anything that's creative or innovative. [...] There's a premium on being safe and conventional in national politics, and which is—I think it's ineffective. I think it leads to running really mediocre campaigns, but I also think it's bad for the larger democratic system.

It is this premium on what's always been done, combined with real uncertainty about campaign effects, that explains some of the paradoxes we face when we assume campaign professionals are either mercenaries or masterminds: they are sometimes a bit of both, but they are primarily people navigating careers in a field that is simultaneously deeply competitive and where the effects of any given action are contingent, uncertain, and hard to measure (though they generally won't say so in public).

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