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Introduction

On May 31, 1998, an editorial by Heidi Behrens-Benedict, an interior designer by trade, appeared in the *Seattle Times* in response to the school shootings in Springfield, Oregon, ten days before. In that editorial, Behrens-Benedict said, “I am sick to death of the National Rifle Association (NRA) and its disgusting perversion of our Constitution,” adding that she would “not support any elected official who accept[ed] money from the NRA,” and that she would “actively work to see them unseated” (Behrens-Benedict 1998, B7). Behrens-Benedict did not know how prophetic her words would be. Less than a week later she was a candidate for the United States House of Representatives in Washington’s Eighth Congressional District, a seat held by Jennifer Dunn, the fifth-ranking leader among Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives at the time.

Heidi Behrens-Benedict was spurred to seek elective office because she felt strongly about changing public policy in an issue area she believed in; in other words, she was the ideal candidate for a representative democracy.¹ However, Behrens-Benedict was a political unknown before she threw her proverbial hat into the ring of electoral politics; she was an amateur in the truest sense of the word.² In an era where campaigns are dominated by television commercials, campaign contributions, and voter cynicism, the ability of candidates like Heidi Behrens-Benedict to mount a serious campaign is limited. Not only was her candidacy taken lightly by journalists and the GOP, even Behrens-Benedict’s own party was less than enthusiastic about her candidacy. She recalls, for instance, that during her initial conversation

with the state Democratic Party, "officials were nice but skeptical" (Nelson 1998a, B1).³

If Behrens-Benedict were a candidate running for Congress in the mid-1800s,⁴ the local- and state-party organizations would have been the backbone of the campaign. However, candidates running for office today find themselves in a "candidate-centered" electoral system in which party organizations cannot be counted on for a great deal of help, as the focus is on the candidate, not the party. In fact, prior to 1998, the Washington State Democratic Party had a history of "bailing out" on candidates whose chances of winning were less than stellar (Nelson 1998b). In this instance, according to Behrens-Benedict, the state Democratic Party was leery of her decision to run for office, taking the attitude of "we'll see how she does, and if her arms and legs don't blow off, . . . we'll look at [supporting her as a candidate]" (Behrens-Benedict 2001). This sharply contrasted with her preconceived notion that the state party would welcome with "open arms" someone who was willing to take on a powerful and popular incumbent (Behrens-Benedict 2001).

Few newcomers to electoral politics know how to run for Congress or how to begin setting up a campaign organization. "I'm getting ready to drive home [from a meeting with the gun-control advocacy group Washington Cease Fire], and I realize I have no idea how to run for Congress," Behrens-Benedict (2001) recalls. Where was this political novice to turn for help, then, if not the party organization? Where could she find experienced help to assist her in communicating with voters in Washington's Eighth Congressional District, or with any of the other aspects of a campaign that are totally foreign to a political novice?

Modern campaign organizations at the federal and state-wide level are not unlike small business operations.⁵ Like businesses, the size of modern campaigns and the budgets they operate with are substantial. Over the past two election cycles, for example, the average candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives raised enough money to support a budget that approached \$700,000 with many candidates raising close to one million, while the average U.S. Senate candidate's budget was over \$5 million in 2000 and \$3 million in 2002 with some candidates raising over \$10 million (see Table 1.1). Even the most entrepreneurial businessperson would not think of starting a small business with budgets such as these without obtaining help; to put themselves in a position to be successful, they must create a detailed plan for how they are going to be successful through consultation with financial consultants and advisors, marketing and advertising experts, as well as accountants and attorneys, and they must set up reliable sources of financing.⁶ Getting the right advice from staff who

Table 1.1 Average Budgets of Congressional Candidates during the 2000 and 2002 Election Cycles

<i>Average Receipts</i>	<i>Senate Candidates</i>	<i>House Candidates</i>
2000		
All Candidates	\$ 5,304,857	\$ 661,475
Incumbent Candidates	\$ 4,503,103	\$ 890,620
Open-Seat Candidates	\$16,551,000	\$1,159,375
Challenger Candidates	\$ 2,427,096	\$ 309,603
2002		
All Candidates	\$ 3,771,159	\$ 679,789
Incumbent Candidates	\$ 4,534,814	\$ 916,913
Open-Seat Candidates	\$ 8,271,250	\$1,137,934
Challenger Candidates	\$ 2,105,882	\$ 261,517

Source: Federal Election Commission, "Financial Activity of General Election Congressional Candidates—1990–2002," table included in press release "House and Senate Candidates Spend \$963 Million During 2001–2002" released on June 18, 2003. www.fec.gov/press/20030618canstat/20030618canstat.html.

share the goals of the entrepreneur is also key to creating a successful venture (Graham 2001).

Individuals who decide to put their names forward for public office, incumbents and challengers alike, face similar decisions and challenges before their campaigns even begin. Coming up with a name for a campaign is not a difficult task for either incumbents or challengers. It usually results in something catchy or familiar, like Bush/Cheney 2000, Clinton/Gore '96, Moore for Congress, or Watts for Congress, which becomes not only the name of the campaign but of an organization to which supporters can contribute money. However, devising a strategy that will lead to a successful campaign is more difficult. As will be explored in later chapters, candidates are on their own for the most part in today's campaigns in terms of forming their own campaign organization and getting the right people into key staff positions.

Heidi Behrens-Benedict garnered 40.3 percent of the vote in her 1998 campaign for Congress, giving Representative Jennifer Dunn her closest race ever. Although she did not win, Behrens-Benedict, as well as local political observers, did consider her 1998 campaign a success; a political unknown earning over 40 percent of the vote in their first foray into running for office is simply not a common occurrence. The Behrens-Benedict case illustrates how the successes of a campaign also extend into less easily measured factors. Accordingly, she was able to make the voters in Washington's Eighth Congressional District more aware of Representative Dunn's voting record in Congress on issues

that were of significance to the district. The 1998 race also showed Republicans that they could not afford to take the eighth district for granted the next time around. In other words, the Behrens-Benedict campaign made that district more competitive than it had been, thus forcing Dunn to pay closer attention to her next election and to her constituents—in effect forcing the incumbent to represent the district.

Although they were not many in number, “instrumental” in this success, says Behrens-Benedict, were her campaign advisors, including a campaign manager and a political consulting firm, the Evans-McDonough Co., which provided survey research and general strategic advice. Just as a new small business venture is unlikely to be successful without individuals who have experience in the same industry and who can contribute technical expertise that the businessperson would not otherwise have, campaigns need these kinds of individuals as well. As Behrens-Benedict herself said, she had “no idea how to run for Congress” (Behrens-Benedict 2001).

Political advisors of this nature are the focus of this book. Without help from political consultants—paid political operatives who give advice and provide services to candidates—Behrens-Benedict, and other candidates like her, would not be able to mount much of a campaign at all. Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster familiar with the Behrens-Benedict campaign, believes that without these advisors Behrens-Benedict could not have been as successful as she was in 1998:

She wouldn't have understood the kind of budget she needed to raise, [and] she wouldn't have understood how to spend it . . . She would not have been able to write copy [for campaign communications]. She wouldn't know the rules of direct mail . . . (Lake 2001)

The successes of the Behrens-Benedict campaign and others like it “indicate that large expenditures on consultants, staff, and advertising permit amateurs to overcome initial deficits” that they face (Canon 1990, 3).

The use of political consultants has become a near necessity in modern congressional elections. Nearly two-thirds of all candidates running for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992 hired at least one professional consultant, up from just over 46 percent in 1990 (Medvic 2000; 2001).⁷ During the 1998 election cycle the average number of consultants hired per congressional campaign was five, and among incumbents only, this figure jumped to nearly seven (Herrnson 2000a). In addition, the influence of consultants has found its way into down-ballot races. Candidates for offices such as auditor and

treasurer in Howard County, Indiana, school board in Duval City, Florida, and circuit court clerk in Chesapeake, Virginia, have all employed professional campaign advice (Johnson 2000). The impact of consultants is no longer limited to a few federal candidates; today they can be found in the campaigns of the highest federal official to the most local of candidates.

This seemingly ever-present place in many congressional campaigns today has led consultants' critics to argue that they are responsible for many of the ills that are equated with modern elections in the United States. For example, consultants are commonly believed to be responsible for "negative" and "attack" television advertisements, the increasing cost of campaigning, and the decline of political parties, to name only a few of the problems that plague our electoral system. However, professional political consultants do not deserve blame for these or other problems of modern campaigns. In fact, as later chapters will illustrate, professional consultants are in a position to enhance democratic elections. Because of their unique place in the electoral system they have an opportunity to help not only their candidate-clients, but voters and parties as well. Those institutions and individuals they are thought to damage can in fact be bolstered by consultants' participation in campaigns.

This is not to say that the appearance and ascendance of the modern political consultant has not changed the dynamics of the electoral process. Exactly *how* professional political consultants have changed the way in which elections are waged in the United States and how they fit into the modern electoral context are the central questions explored in this book. The relationships consultants have with candidates, political parties, voters, and the media are the main themes of this research. An empirical analysis of the effect consultants have on candidates' fund-raising and electoral success is also included.

The term political consultant refers not to the earliest of political advisors, but to the specialist political operatives that have developed in the last half-century.⁸ The first campaign consultants, those who forged the way for the industry that exists today, functioned as general strategic advisors to candidates. Today, however, consultants offer their clients, which include candidates, political parties, and interest groups, specific technical and tactical advice. Now, instead of one general advisor making strategic plans, many campaigns (at all levels) hire a cadre of consultants, each one offering the campaign a different service.⁹

This kind of involvement creates new relationships in election campaigns. Although campaigns have always been comprised of

candidates, political parties, outside groups, and most importantly voters, the relationships between them were relatively straightforward. For example, candidates communicated directly with voters with methods that today would be described as “retail” politics. However, as technology became more advanced, the need for more specific knowledge grew, as did the need for consultants with this specific knowledge. Instead of a candidate-political party relationship, or a candidate-voter relationship, the dynamic now includes a triangular combination of actors with political consultants squarely in the middle. For example, instead of relying on handshakes and other forms of direct voter contact, today candidates send their messages through radio or television spots that are created by a media consultant, or targeted direct mailings created by direct mail specialists. The messages that candidates send to voters are crafted, in part, by professional advisors. Instead of a candidate communicating a message that tows the party line, today personalized messages are crafted for individual candidates with the help of survey research, focus groups, and opposition research provided by political consultants.

From their beginning, consultants operated in the shadows of campaigns. In cities across the United States from the late 1970s through the 1980s, if there was a political campaign of importance chances are that there was a political consultant “behind the scenes, promoting some [candidate or issue] . . .” (Kraske 1999, A1). This is beginning to change. Political consultants are more visible today than ever before, with some taking center stage in campaigns. The 1993 New Jersey governor’s race has been described as a clash between “two campaign titans.” Not between candidates Jim Florio and Christine Todd Whitman, but between political consultants Ed Rollins and James Carville (Berke 1993, A1).¹⁰ More recently, heads turned when Al Gore brought Tony Coelho, Carter Eskew, and Naomi Wolf into his 2000 presidential campaign as advisers and consultants; instead of the campaign and candidate making news, it was the consultants who made the headlines.

In addition, the organization a candidate puts together often serves as a measuring stick for his or her campaign. For example, U.S. Representative Frank Pallone’s hiring of a “team of high-profile political consultants in preparation for a [New Jersey] Senate campaign” caught the attention of the *New York Times* (Dao 1999, B1). These types of evaluative judgments can be found as far back as the early 1980s when the *National Journal* noted the “impressive . . . group of professionals” that the Reagan for President Committee had assembled (Bonafede 1980, 1224). Others, too, notice the types of organizations

candidates put together. The presence of professional consultants in campaigns can have the effect of attracting donors (Herrnson 1992), or even scaring away potential challengers to incumbent officeholders.

Consultants are not only covered by the media, but they are often called on to comment on the campaign or issues important to it; in other words, candidates' consultants are becoming spokespersons for the campaign. For example, when an official in New York City was asked about a city issue that could affect Mayor Rudy Giuliani's campaign, "he did not, in his capacity as a citywide elected official, offer an assessment. Instead, he referred the inquiry to his political consultant" (Barry 1999, 1). Consultants have also begun to comment on campaigns in which they are not involved. These more visible roles of consultants serve other purposes as well. When speaking for the candidate, consultants provide "spin control," message discipline, and a less damaging way to absorb controversy or criticism.¹¹

Inattention Paid to Consultants

For many years, political scientists have tried to explain why voters vote the way they do.¹² "As a result our attention has moved away from the electoral institutions in which consultants now play such a commanding role. In general we pay less attention to the dynamics of electoral processes and the processes of campaigning" (Petracca 1989, 11). However, as campaign strategy and tactics have become more and more important, consultants have become more important as well (Bennett 1996). Given the omnipresent nature consultants seem to have in campaigns, and their growing presence as news stories, if we are to truly understand the dynamics of election campaigns, we must understand the role that political consultants play. We must also know and understand who political consultants are, just as we have a good appreciation of candidates' and voters' backgrounds and beliefs. To ignore political consultants in an analysis of U.S. elections means an incomplete analysis of the phenomenon.

The call for political science to pay attention to political consultants is also not new; as David L. Rosenbloom (1973) noted: "The rise of political campaign management in America deserves the closest study because the changes it reflects and brings go to the heart of our political system" (6). Unfortunately, this call has remained relatively unanswered. Until the 1980s, political consultants were mostly ignored in academic circles (notable exceptions include Kelley 1956; Nimmo 1970; Agranoff 1972; and Rosenbloom 1973). Of those consultant-focused works that

did appear, many were “produced by journalists or by practitioners whose writing consist[ed] of insider accounts of campaigning and ‘how to’ books” (Thurber 1998, 145). The earliest scholarly works were mainly descriptive accounts of the popular campaign tactics employed at that time, and portrayed consultants mainly as an extension of the public-relations field. Consultants were seen as individuals who tried to sell candidates as they would laundry detergent or toothpaste. As the field continued to develop, consultants gained more attention, but it was not until the early 1980s and Larry Sabato’s (1981) influential work, *The Rise of Political Consultants*, that an academic work took on the question of consultants’ place in campaigns head-on. However, this and other early work consisted of no systematic study of consultants—either of their behavior, their attitudes, or their profile as individuals. Assertions about consultants’ relationships with political parties, their candidate-clients, and the media, and the effects they have had in election campaigns are abundant and remain untested.¹³

The Current Research

In the following chapters, the changing nature of political consulting and the ways in which these professionals are changing the dynamics of U.S. election campaigns are examined through a systematic and thorough analysis of political consultants’ attitudes and behavior. One word of caution is important here: the reader looking for a series of tell-all stories about behind-the-scenes campaign tactics will be disappointed. This book is ultimately about candidates, voters, political parties, and how election contests are fought in today’s context. My goals are to make the reader more familiar with the consulting industry and to help them gain a greater understanding of who political consultants are, and to evaluate consultants’ effects in campaigns. Throughout the remaining chapters, the reader will explore how professional political consultants fit into the modern electoral context and will be in a better position to evaluate their place in democratic elections.

The necessity for this type of work is clear given the lack of scholarly attention political consultants have previously been given. More importantly, the early works devoted to political consultants (Kelley 1956; Nimmo 1970; Rosenbloom 1973; and Sabato 1981, for example) are clearly outdated. The industry has changed in at least three significant ways that call for a new examination of political

consultants. First, the industry has seen tremendous overall growth.¹⁴ One of the early works on consultants found, as of 1957, only roughly thirty or forty individuals acting as campaign managers in races around the country on a regular basis (Rosenbloom 1973, 51). Today, estimates of the number of consultants in this industry range anywhere from 3,000 to 7,000 (Johnson 2001). In addition, since the earliest works devoted to consultants, a professional organization, the American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC), has formed and developed. The AAPC has established industry norms and a code of ethics “to raise the standards of practice in political consultation, thereby enhancing the political process and improving public confidence in the American political system,” and “to provide professional guidance, assistance, and education to members as they develop the skills, techniques, and business procedures required for successful political consultation” (AAPC 2000).

Second, along with the general growth of the field, there has been great turnover in the industry. Nearly 25 percent of all current consultants entered the business after President Reagan left office, 55 percent first became consultants after Sabato’s work in 1981, and a full 85 percent first became active in consulting after Watergate. It seems as though there are new consultants “hanging out their shingle” with each new election cycle, and that “there is always a new top dog” in the business (Carville 1999). Although recognizable names from the early days of consulting remain active—Peter Hart, Richard Wirthlin, Joseph Napolitan, and Harrison Hickman, for example—fresh consultants enter the industry every election cycle and become its new stars.

Third, and as noted above, consulting has evolved into an industry of experts and specialists, each of whom have different roles and experiences in campaigns. A detailed division of labor and the development of expertise has evolved rapidly in the last two decades. Coinciding with this evolution have been great changes in campaign technology. New technology has exploded on the campaign scene in nearly every area of campaigns. The industry is technology driven, especially with respect to developments in information technology, television, survey research, demographic targeting, and looking toward the future, the Internet.

In addition, early attention paid to political consultants succeeded only in making untested and unsubstantiated assertions. This book contains tests and evaluations of many of the hypotheses and assertions made about consultants, their relationship with clients and voters, their motivations for being political professionals, and the electoral process in general.

Plan of the Book

In chapter 2 I describe how the proliferation of political consultants has altered the dynamics of U.S. elections. As noted above, the modern electoral context includes relationships among consultants, candidates, political parties, interest groups, voters, and the media. When consultants became a fixture in American elections, these relationships changed. I begin chapter 2 with a brief history of political consulting in order to provide some background and general information such as the birth of the industry and the trend taking the field from general strategists to specialists. The discussion then turns to an initial consideration of the relationships consultants have with candidates, voters, political parties, and the media, and how these relationships and actors have changed over time.

In chapter 3 I provide a general description of the consulting industry by addressing questions such as: Who are political consultants? And, how do the individuals who run candidates' campaigns compare to their clients and the electorate? Consultants' motivations for becoming active in the political process are also examined and compared to those of party officials and political amateurs (including volunteers and voters). The data that allow for an examination of these questions (as well as those addressed in chapters 4 and 5) are a unique set of survey data centering on the political consulting industry. In the spring of 1999, in conjunction with the "Improving Campaign Conduct" project at American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies, 505 thirty-minute in-depth interviews with principals in political consulting firms of all types from across the nation were conducted yielding the most comprehensive and detailed survey of the industry to date. These data provided a unique perspective from which to evaluate and explore this group of important individuals and is the basis for much of the information provided below.

Whereas in chapter 3 I provide basic information about the consulting industry, in chapter 4 I continue to analyze consultants' relationships with different actors in the electoral process, with a focus on their attitudes and beliefs about those actors, building on earlier work that has begun to address some of these questions (Thurber, Nelson, and Dulio 1998; 1999; 2000). This includes an examination of data that provide insight into how consultants view those they work for and against (candidates and parties), those they are trying to persuade (voters), and those who report on, and provide a great deal of information during, the campaign (the media).

I devote chapter 5 solely to consultants' relationship with political parties because this relationship has been one that has received a good deal of attention and has produced some controversy. As noted above, some have argued that political consultants are bad for democracy and political parties; in particular, consultants are said to have pushed parties into decline and are thought of as the rivals of political parties. In chapter 5 I investigate this question and provide an updated illustration of the relationship the two actors have.

In chapter 6 the focus of the book shifts to a question of consultant performance. Only part of the picture of how consultants are changing the way in which elections are waged in the United States can be uncovered with attitudinal data. A more complete assessment of the way consultants are changing elections in American can be obtained with behavioral data. Therefore, I analyze the value consultants add to a candidate's campaign. Previous research has examined the effect consultants have on a campaign's fund-raising and vote totals.¹⁵ However, the analyses in chapter 6 test the hypothesis that hiring certain consultants has a greater impact on candidate fund-raising and vote totals than hiring just any consultant.

In chapter 7 I explore the implications of the relationships discussed in chapters 2 through 6. For instance, the reliance most candidates have on paid communications techniques to spread their campaign's message (i.e., radio, television, and direct mail) speaks to the relationship consultants have with candidates and voters alike. In this final chapter I address what the specifics of relationships such as this mean for the representative nature of our democracy. Consultants' attitudes about voters, candidates, and political parties will also be revisited, as these relationships are important links when discussing the effect consultants have had on our representative democracy. Further, the ways in which consultants can benefit different campaign actors, as well as democratic discourse, are addressed. Finally, the future of consultants and their influence and impact is considered in the context of recent campaign reforms.