Political Consultants and the Extension of Party Goals

Robin Kolodny, Temple University
Angela Logan, Temple University

Political consultants are seen as influential actors in American politics who may affect policy long after their service on an election has concluded. Many observers of the consulting industry (see, for example, Shea 1996; Sabato 1981) have suggested that the use of political consultants has been especially bad for political parties, contributing to their decline. Proponents of the party decline thesis maintain that consultants weaken parties by giving candidates independent support bases for conducting their campaigns, creating a campaign climate where individual candidates take the voting public’s focus away from party platforms. But consultants have become prominent because the parties cannot always offer up-to-date technical services and close attention to local situations. Some political scientists suggest that political consultants can assist parties in attaining their goals by providing the highly professional and technical services to party candidates that party organizations themselves cannot (Luntz 1988). Further, political consultants tend to work in concert with political parties because they depend on the party for a supply of clients (Sabato 1981; Luntz 1988). Here we explore another dimension of the consultant-political party relationship: the role political parties play in training political consultants. We hypothesize that contemporary political consultants are likely to have had close links (such as prior employment) with a political party since the 1970s, when parties began adopting new technologies and training their employees to use them.

Consultant background vis-a-vis political parties can lead to two very different notions of the effect of consultant activity on our politics. We label these the adversarial view and the allied view of consultant-party relationships. According to the adversarial view, consultants do not compliment parties and act as little more than advertising agencies. Adversarial political consultants assess the market (in this case the voters and potential financial supporters), assess their product (the candidate), and suggest modifications they believe will make the product more appealing (alteration of policy positions, particular campaign strategies, physical appearance of the candidate, etc.) to consumers (voters). The only thing that matters to the adversarial consultant is that his or her candidate/product has won. The consultant will have his bill paid and be able to use the victory to gain more clients and build his business. Such an economic theory of consultancy posits that consultants deal in the currency of political victories and that they are apolitical themselves. By implication, consultants should come from backgrounds that promote the skills of market assessment and product packaging, from careers in advertising, public relations, journalism, or market research. Our belief is that the consulting industry began this way, but has moved away from this model since the 1980s.

According to the allied view, political consultants are not anathemic to a party’s mission, i.e., to elect like-minded candidates who will promote a certain agenda through the implementation of public policy. They seek clients of one general perspective (though one could argue that such a strategy merely preserves certain economies-of-scale for the consultant), effectively limiting the scope of the marketplace available to them. If consultants only work with candidates of a particular party affiliation, they probably limit the amount of tinkering with their product (the candidate) that is credible. However, consultants are also likely only to work for clients in competitive districts, which makes them appear opportunistic. They are, but so are political party organizations to competitive candidates (Jacobson 1985/86; Herrnson 1988; Aldrich 1995). Allied political consultants do for candidates what political parties simply cannot: they offer targeted technical assistance and personalized advice to the candidate who hires them. According to the allied view, political consultants value party goals because they have worked in a political party’s organizations, with the party’s elected officials, or on grassroots campaigns embraced by the party at large. We believe this trend has emerged more clearly in the past twenty years.

We contend that political consultants have increased their connections to the parties and that the parties have come to rely on the “private sector” of political consultancy to provide specialized services. Our belief in the emergence of an industry dominated by allied consultants was confirmed by the results of a survey we conducted among political consultants in 1997. We investigated three hypotheses: political consultants are at least as likely to have come from party backgrounds as from communications backgrounds; political consultants who have worked for a political party continue to have a relationship with that party and are more likely to have political parties among their clients than are those from other backgrounds; and political consultants who have worked for political parties have a better opinion of political parties than consultants from non-party backgrounds.

The Interdependence of Parties and Consultants

We wanted to explore the relationship between parties and consultants and we began doing so by asking why consultants usurped the parties’ role of giving advice to candidates. Democratic consultant Robert Squier explained that, “Both political parties were negligent in understanding the new technology.
TABLE 1
Previous Employment of Political Consultants Without Previous Party Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Campaigns</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Communications or Journalism</th>
<th>Private Sector</th>
<th>Public Sector</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Mentions</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Recent Job</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and putting it to use. They allowed entrepreneurs like myself to flourish. The parties should have taken our place in that technology" (quoted in Luntz 1988, 116). But parties simply could not provide sufficient personalized service, day-to-day advice, or regional experience. Consultants proved to be better equipped to deal with the unique circumstances of each race and district. They also have a pecuniary interest in seeing their clients win and are therefore more likely to provide individual attention and service.

The political parties are keenly aware that consultants have supplanted them. In fact, parties routinely hire consultants as independent contractors to fulfill their own needs.

Candidates are given a list of reputable, loyal consultants by the party committees (especially the congressional campaign committees). Sometimes hiring a consultant off this list can be a prerequisite for receiving party funding. Often, these preferred consultants are former party employees who have organized their own consulting firms. The committees want to retain the talents of former employees who are already familiar with their organization and established in political networks (Brownstein 1986, 1041). Some political consultants regularly work within the party apparatus. Consultants are hired to conduct surveys, prepare internal audits, and carry out specialized research (Herrmon 1988). The parties benefit because they can use the consultants to achieve their electoral goals, while the consultants benefit by achieving more victories.

Consultants working directly with parties also have a good chance for continuous employment in non-election years.

But why do political professionals leave party organizations to become political consultants? Consultants often think parties are too inflexible. They feel the party committees are bureaucratic, and are ruled too much by a patronage mentality (Salmore and Salmore 1989, 240). Consultants have the freedom to pick and choose their clients, determine their political strategies, and set their own salaries. Also, consultants can refine a particular skill more sharply than they could in a political party environment.

Parties have accepted consultants as a necessity. They do what the parties simply cannot. This does not mean that parties have no place in elections. On the contrary, as Schlesinger (1984) notes, parties still account for most electoral victories, despite their weaknesses. As Aldrich (1995) contends, politicians formed political parties to provide economies-of-scale for the conduct of elections. Voter mobilization is the major task that Aldrich attributes to contemporary political parties. The question remains: Do parties and consultants compliment or compete with each other? We turn now to an examination of the consultants' own experiences to help us answer this question.

Survey of Consultants
Description of the Survey
We administered a survey to 341 political consultants listed under the "General Consultant" heading of Campaigns & Elections's 1997-98 Political Pages. The survey was mailed to the individual indicated as the contact person. We subsequently eliminated 23 people because our surveys were undeliverable. We received 125 usable surveys, for a response rate of 39.3%. We chose to survey general consultants because of the wide variety of specialties practiced by these consultants and because their services are the ones that most obviously overlap with political parties (that is, a comprehensive approach to campaign management).

Our sample was diverse. With DC-area consultants defined as those with easy access to the Washington, DC metro system, our sample was biased away from Washington with 80.8% of respondents currently working outside DC. We also asked consultants to state the party affiliation of the majority of their clients. Our sample represented both parties well, with 47.2% of respondents working predominantly for Democrats, 41.6% working predominantly for Republicans, 8.0% working for both parties equally, and 3.2% stating their clients were not aligned with either party.

We asked consultants to indicate whether they had previous employment experience at a political party organization to explore our first hypothesis. Those who worked for a political party organization (at any level) before becoming a consultant constituted 40.8% of our sample. We also asked consultants if they worked for a party organization after becoming a consultant to account for some fluidity between parties and consultants. Overall, when selecting for those who said they worked for parties before or after starting their consulting careers, the percentage of those who had party employment ties moved up to 52.4. For those who did not have party employment experience, we asked respondents to tell us what their prior careers were, indicating multiple employment sectors if that was appropriate. All these respondents had previous employment experience other than consulting. Table 1 shows that the most common previous occupation for nonparty-employed consultants was with individual candidate campaigns, followed by government and communications/journalism. The private
TABLE 2
Level of Political Party Employment by Political Party Worked For

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEMOCRAT</th>
<th>National Committee</th>
<th>Senatorial Campaign Committee</th>
<th>Congressional Campaign Committee</th>
<th>State Party Committee</th>
<th>County Party Committee</th>
<th>City Party Committee</th>
<th>Other Party Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Mentions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Recent</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REPUBLICAN</th>
<th>National Committee</th>
<th>Senatorial Campaign Committee</th>
<th>Congressional Campaign Committee</th>
<th>State Party Committee</th>
<th>County Party Committee</th>
<th>City Party Committee</th>
<th>Other Party Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Mentions</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Recent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sector was a more distant fourth background, with the public sector and miscellaneous other positions accounting for the remainder. It is significant that so many consultants worked with individual candidate campaigns outside the political party structure.

We asked those who worked for political parties to indicate the party level at which they worked, with the most recent first. Table 2 shows responses by party affiliation. There is an interesting difference between political parties. Republican consultants more often come from national political party offices, while Democratic consultants more often come from state and local party organizations. These findings support the assumption that the Republican party is a more nationally directed organization while the Democratic party is more locally oriented party. Our first assumption was confirmed. Consultants are slightly more likely to have had political party employment experience than not to have had it. Republican consultants are more likely to have had national party experience while Democrats are more likely to have state or local party experience.

Of the consultants who had some employment experience with a political party, almost 77% said political parties were now or had been clients of theirs. Republican consultants had a greater proportion in this category (84%) than Democratic consultants (71%). Only 44% of consultants without party employment experience said they had political parties as clients at some point in time.

When we asked if consultants and parties had ongoing coordination of effort when conducting campaigns, the results did differ by party employment experience, but not as much as we thought they would. We asked respondents to indicate the extent of their coordination with party organizations on a standard five point scale. The responses on the low end of the scale did not differ much by party experience. Of those who had no party experience, 14% said they never coordinated with parties and 44% said they had minimal coordination. For those with party experience, 7% said they had no coordination and 41% had minimal coordination. However, 33% of nonparty-experienced consultants had some coordination with parties, but only 7% said their coordination was frequent, and 2% said it was extensive. Those with party employment histories said they had some coordination 24% of the time, frequent coordination 22% of the time, and extensive coordination 6% of the time. Clearly, those consultants with no prior party employment history work less with political parties than those with party employment histories. Here, party employment does seem to influence the extent of present-day party consultant coordination. However, there is less evidence to support the assertion that former party employees will have good relations primarily with the party organization for which they worked. On the contrary, former party employees tend to have strong relations with a number of party organizations, though all with the same political party for which they previously worked.

We also asked consultants who said they had party employment experience what role this experience played in their current career as a political consultant. Table 3 reports these results. Respondents are about evenly split on the first question regarding the importance of party employment to securing a position as a political consultant, with the same number of respondents answering "not very" or "minimally" as answered "very helpful" or "integral." Respondents were less likely to say that political parties helped them secure clients, with 47% answering either "not very" or "minimally," and only 36% answering "very helpful" or "integral." However, when asked about the role parties played in their overall effectiveness as political consultants, respondents gave much more credit to the parties, with 52% of respondents answering "very helpful" or "integral," and only 29% answering "not very" or "minimally." So although consultants do not credit parties with starting their careers, they do credit political parties for sustaining those careers.

We can say that prior party employment favors party-consultant coordination, but it does not guarantee it. Those with previous party employment were more likely to have parties as clients and were more
TABLE 3
Importance of Party Employment to Careers of Political Consultants (with any party employment experience)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Party Employment</th>
<th>Not Very (1)</th>
<th>Minimally (2)</th>
<th>Somewhat (3)</th>
<th>Very Helpful (4)</th>
<th>Integral (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to Becoming a Consultant</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Securing Clients</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Consultant Effectiveness</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

likely to coordinate their efforts with political parties. However, there is less clear evidence that the particular party organization a consultant worked for is their chief contact point. This may indicate that it matters only whether a consultant had party experience in any party organization, not just the one considering their services. Finally, consultants who had party employment backgrounds were more likely to give credit to party organizations for enhancing their overall effectiveness as political consultants.

Assessment of National Party Effectiveness by Political Consultants

We asked consultants to indicate what functions political parties performed that were of value to political consultants, using two open-ended questions designed to probe the relationship between political parties and political consultants (from the consultants' perspectives). Although consultants were not generally impressed with the quality of political party services, several responses were interesting. Political parties earned the lowest marks from consultants for their abilities to develop campaign themes, for their utility as sources for hiring their own employees, and for their assistance in scheduling speakers for consultants' clients. Political parties fared slightly better on fundraising assistance, client referral, and the identification of close races. In these latter two categories, significant differences in assessment were found between those who had party employment experience and those who did not.

The political parties fared best (on assessments by all respondents) on mobilization of voters and assistance with opposition research. Consultants give political parties credit for providing services of broad scope, while questioning their abilities to provide more specialized services.

We asked consultants to comment on what functions political parties perform better than political consultants and what functions consultants perform better than political parties. Despite a number of perfunctory "none" and "all" answers, we received many insightful responses. Consultants repeatedly stressed the parties' positive ability to organize voters at the grassroots level, especially for voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives on election day. The next most common citations were fundraising (especially with the PAC community), the effective use of soft money, and opposition research. A few consultants said that the parties could vertically integrate campaigns well from the top to the bottom of the ticket. One consultant addressed the difficulty of answering this question because of the reliance of political parties themselves had on political consultants:

"[Political parties] nationally raise funds; most state and national candidates have personal organizations that perform in their behalf, and use consultants liberally. Additionally, the various national committees retain consultants and as a result your mix becomes blurred. So many activities are performed by specialists.

The interesting insight here is that specialized help can come from almost any corner and it matters little whether a candidate gets this help from parties or consultants, as long as he or she gets the specialized advice.

When stating what political consultants could do better than political parties, most respondents agreed that consultants gave candidates individualized attention parties simply cannot because of their size, the number of races they track, and the increasing complexity of campaigns. Consultants said they worked mostly on strategy and management issues, and that their advice was "personal," "day-to-day," informed by a deeper knowledge of the local context than that available to parties, and included "objective" or "honest" assessments of the candidate's talents, tactics, and chances for victory. One consultant summed this up well:

Political parties too often employ a cookie cutter approach. Consultants are better equipped to deal with the unique circumstances of each race and district. Consultants also have a pecuniary interest in seeing their clients win and are therefore more likely to provide quality individual attention and service.

We asked for further comments about the relationship between parties and consultants that the survey had not adequately captured. Two divergent observations deserve mention. One is the extent to which parties and consultants complement each other. The other addresses the competition between them. On complementary roles, some consultants are clear in acknowledging the importance of the party in all elections, especially general elections. As one consultant put it:

"Political parties and consultants..."
gins with an acrimonious primary, which parties must then smooth over. In general elections, the "D" or "R" will ordinarily produce the vast majority of the votes a candidate receives. Candidate campaigns, guided by consultants, then add to the total, through combinations of tactics . . . the margin of victory is usually less than 10% or so.

Here is an admission of the limited utility of consultants for the bulk of electoral activity. However, this respondent also acknowledges that, in marginal races, consultant input can be the difference between victory and defeat. Another consultant sees the complementary roles of parties and consultants as a matter of focus:

Parties do good at seeing the big picture, but most are not very good at seeing the individual needs of candidates. Parties can provide for common needs of candidates or needs most and or all candidates will have. It is the job of the consultant to see the specific individual needs of a particular candidate.

In this way, parties and consultants do well to work together, a recurrent theme in the open-ended questions. But these relationships also breed tensions, especially when consultants feel that parties do not value consultant contributions to campaigns. One consultant comments that:

Political parties, by and large, are staffed by wonderful, dedicated people who truly want to improve things and make a difference for the better. At the same time, they are frequently hopelessly myopic, and just don't understand how things work . . . . Voters will respond to their self-interests as they see them, and that will frequently be different from the interests of deeply dedicated partisan volunteers and staffers.

Such dedication to principles is echoed by Aldrich (1995), and more importantly it leads some consultants to see the parties as being less capable of objective analysis of the political landscape. The high turnover that political parties experience can make long-term working relationships between parties and consultants difficult. As one consultant put it:

The staff of political parties change often—because of this our relation-
ships and their effectiveness also change. In a market economy, the more promising talent will want to go out on their own and generally leave the less experienced to run the parties.

This comment brings us full circle. Some consultants do the work they do because of their frustrations with the party's limited ability to service candidates and conduct elections effectively.

Conclusions

We have shown that political parties do indeed train political consultants, whether they do so intentionally or not. When a party employee leaves the party payroll, their relationship with their former employer may be reinvented. The parties often hire their former employees as consultants and, in turn, consultants with party employment histories credit party organizations with successful electoral efforts more often than consultants without party backgrounds. This preliminary analysis supports the allied view of the party-consultant relationship, a view that holds that consultants assist parties more than they hurt them. More consultants in this study have been employed by parties than have not, and, thus, more consultants credit parties with positive attributes than negative ones. Consultants who left the parties find that parties do mass mobilization well and handle specialized technical services poorly. What we cannot address is the extent to which consultants carry party goals (e.g., majority control of governmental institutions, public policy goals, long term voter mobilization ideals, etc.) with them to the private consulting world. This is, of course, a central question worthy of future study.

References


Notes

1. One reason for this was a lack of information about the number of principals at each firm. Although we asked respondents for names of others who should be surveyed at their firms, none volunteered this information. Therefore, DC firms were undersampled compared to non-DC firms.

2. We found that this definition was expanded by some of our respondents who raised interesting concerns. One wanted to know if volunteer work for a presidential campaign counted as previous employment. Another said his White House employment was party employment. We counted these as previous party employment.

3. The question used to ascertain this fluidity was unclear to some respondents. While some people answered the question in the way we thought we were asking it (direct employment by a party organization), a few considered work they did for political parties who were clients (indirect employment to us) as working for the parties. In some instances, we put all consultants with party ties together, and in others we will speak only of those with explicit prior party employment. Such distinctions will be so indicated.

About the Authors

Robin Kolodny is assistant professor of political science at Temple University. She is the author of Pursuing Majorities: Congressional Campaign Committees in American Politics and was a 1994-95 APSA Congressional Fellow.

Angela Logan is a graduate student in the department of political science at Temple University. Her research interests include political parties, Congress, and elections.

June 1998