

Book Review Symposium

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Building a Business of Politics: The Rise of Political Consulting and the Transformation of American Democracy. By Adam Sheingate. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

You want it to be one way . . . but it's the other way.
—Marlo Stanfield, *The Wire*, Season 4

It wasn't until I finished Adam Sheingate's new book about the history of political consulting that I realized that, by the book's definition, I was a "political consultant." I have always bristled at the terms "political operative" and "political consultant" because they are often used as pejoratives. The term "political consultant" is also so broad that it is meaningless. To classify the research and creation of data for progressive campaigns and advocacy groups that I do at Catalist as being in the same category as, for example, the management and creation of television advertisements on behalf of a labor union seems to miss the trees for the forest, classifying all political services as a monolith. Nonetheless, both the nascent and mature industries discussed in *Building a Business of Politics* bear a striking resemblance to each other. The developments in political technologies that the book covers range from the historical adoption of radio, television, and telephone polling, to the advents of direct mail advertising, data analytics, and the Internet. New advances in technology spur a market for experts who focus on political work, efficiently and effectively delivering the campaign's communications to voters. As older technology wanes in relevance, new generations of actors rise to prominence, as evidenced by the new class of digital consultancies competing with the television and mail consultants who put radio-centric operations out of business.

Building a Business of Politics is a political historian's thorough, well-footnoted, qualitative assessment of the political services industry's effect on the American political system, rather than an economic history of political consulting. I hoped for more historical evidence about why the consulting system evolved to become what it is today, rather than a focus on the

origins of publicity and survey research. I often found Sheingate's skeptical tone about the consulting industry needlessly distracting, especially since he presents little concrete evidence to the reader that would substantiate the need for such a tone. Of course, there can be considerable variation in the quality of consultants, but as a social scientist, I think it is important to think about what a world without consultants would look like. In a simplistic economic model of campaigns, consultants subsidize the expertise of their clients by providing the campaign with services that have high fixed and transactional costs. In that model, consultants are a necessity, and without much competition, there would be serious principal-agent problems. However, there is limited evidence to show that the benefits from consultants are merely avoiding those costs.

Two recent studies illustrate what this counterfactual world might look like without political consultants, and the results may surprise some. Mann and Klostad (2015) detail a field experiment they ran in partnership with a civic organization testing the causal effect of "get out the vote" phone calls in the 2010 general election conducted by professional call centers with varying levels of experience in delivering political messages. The authors found that the call centers specializing in political calls mobilized voters at a much higher rate than their purely commercial counterparts. The nonpolitical call centers in the experiment were also more expensive because they contacted voters at a higher rate with their ineffective message. In another study, Wood (2014), a former member of the analytics department of Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign analyzes "get out the vote" contacts by the Republican National Committee's (RNC) "contractors," as compared to contacts by the Romney campaign. In theory, the campaign's "get out the vote" contacts should have been targeted at likely Romney supporters who were unlikely to vote. In reality, the campaign's "get out the vote" contacts included a much larger share of those who self-reported voting for President Obama in 2008 than the contractor's "get out the vote" contacts. This result indicates that the campaign's contacts were less effective.

tively targeted and mobilized more Obama voters than the RNC contractor's contacts.

While political consultants may take a single-minded, almost Mayhewian approach to their clients' electoral prospects, that alone is not a fair criterion by which to judge a consultant's success. At a minimum, consultants should "do no harm." Although not all consultants meet this standard, it is difficult to argue that most consultants cause social harm. Today, social science has never been more central to political campaigns. Researchers like me stand on the shoulders of those as well known as Harold Lasswell, and those as lost to the sands of time as the Princeton Radio Research Project. Today, nothing illustrates this better than the Analyst Institute and its Consultant Roundtable (of which my employer is a member), a collaboration that combines field experiments and program evaluation with important questions consultants need answered. These endeavors also provide

accountability and new knowledge to both consultants and the organizations they serve.

I did not agree with most of the analysis in *Building a Business of Politics*. The book's tone conveys the author's view that political consulting functions in a way that aligns with his normative vision of how the electoral process should work. However, the reality of the industries that comprise the "political consulting" field is much more complex and nuanced. Sheingate wants "it to be one way . . . but it's the other way."

REFERENCES

- Mann, Christopher B., and Casey A. Klofstad. 2015. "The Role of Call Quality in Voter Mobilization: Implications for Electoral Outcomes and Experimental Design." *Political Behavior* 37 (1): 135–54.
- Wood, Thomas J. 2014. "Ads, Visits, Contact: New Data on Presidential Campaign Effects." PhD diss., University of Chicago.