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Do the Strategists Know Something We Don't Know? Campaign Decisions in American Elections

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Abstract

Political consultants believe that strategic decisions made by candidates in the midst of campaigns help determine election outcomes. Political scientists have traditionally been skeptical of these claims. Indeed, we have produced little evidence that consultant decisions, other than routine actions driven by obvious electoral circumstances, affect outcomes. Despite an increasing overlap between the interests of practitioners and scholars, current research limits the potential for ideas to travel between them. The result is that claims made by consultants about the effects of myriad decisions regarding advertising, public relations strategies, mobilization, and responses to opposition messages remain largely unassessed. Likewise, the practitioner focus on the importance of campaign messages is not central to scholarship. To make academic literature speak to the concerns of practitioners, scholars need to combine their work on the contextual determinants of campaign strategy with their knowledge of the multiple factors that influence voter decision-making.

KEYWORDS: campaigns, elections, political consultants, campaign strategy, campaign effects

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On cable news shows, at Hollywood cocktail parties, and in some undergraduate classrooms, campaign strategy is all the rage. Each election, the chattering classes closely follow the moves and countermoves of the candidates. Popular analysts are constantly predicting how voters will react to the latest political spin. The assumption behind all of this chatter is that the decisions made by campaign strategists alter election outcomes. Political scientists have traditionally held a more skeptical view of the effects of campaign strategy. Scholars have shown that individual characteristics and allegiances guide most voting decisions and that institutions, demographics, and events drive most electoral outcomes. The effects of campaign decisions are thus likely to be overblown.

Yet the study of campaign decision-making and its effects has recently undergone a resurgence of interest in the discipline. As the use of consultants has expanded and as campaign expenditures have increased dramatically, scholars have begun to recognize that campaigns may make important decisions that affect voters. There is now substantially more overlap between the interests of political scientists and campaign practitioners, even though they often use different language and hold different assumptions. What does this burgeoning political science literature have to say about the effects of campaign decisions, especially those that are considered critical by practitioners? Can scholars reject most of the claims made by practitioners, or do we have something to learn from them? Do we even have evidence to assess the veracity of their claims?

I argue that the current scholarly literature limits the potential for ideas to travel between practitioners and scholars because behavioral analysis of campaign effects has proceeded largely independently from investigation of the decisions of campaign practitioners. Practitioners are actively engaged in formulating and implementing many strategies with the intent of affecting electoral outcomes, but political science has not produced much evidence of their impact. Political consultants and scholars have developed similar interests but they have retained distinct tasks, distinct standards for what constitutes an important factor in campaigns, and different beliefs about unexplained variation in electoral outcomes and campaigning.

Political science scholarship offers a nuanced perspective on the potential impact of strategic campaign decisions, a perspective that specifies the significant limits on the agency of campaign practitioners. Scholars need not dismiss their healthy skepticism about the potential influence of candidate behavior on electoral outcomes, but they have a long way to go in evaluating the effects of campaign strategy as practitioners envision them. Scholars cannot, however, limit their investigation to the outcomes preferred by practitioners. Campaign decisions, after all, may also have unintended consequences that are still important for democracy even if they fail to change electoral outcomes.

Political science likely has something to share in informing commentary on campaigns from the perennial practitioner. It is quite unlikely that the public experts on campaigns have learned all that scholarship has to offer. Yet it would be arrogant for political science to assume that it has a monopoly on evidence relevant to campaign decisions, given that practitioners are paid large sums for their knowledge and are often dismissive of political science research as irrelevant to the on-the-ground daily decisions that they make in a campaign. Making political science research speak to the questions that practitioners consider is not a task we should take for granted. It requires listening to their pronouncements, taking their ideas seriously though not regarding them as self-evident, and acknowledging that many questions of interest to practitioners remain unanswered.

In what follows, I aim to begin this process. First, I review practitioner perspectives on campaign strategy. Second, I compare practitioner and scholarly ideas about the effects of campaign decisions. Third, I review the possibilities for political science theories to incorporate practitioner perspectives. Fourth, I analyze the capacity of our methods to test practitioner ideas about the effects of campaign decisions. In the process, I hope to provide a map for how consultant ideas can be incorporated and assessed in political science research.

The View from Practitioners

Campaign practitioners work from a simple assumption: campaign decisions can influence electoral outcomes. According to this story, the strategies chosen by consultants and their execution determine the campaign that is presented to voters, which in turn affects voter decisions and electoral outcomes. Much popular and practitioner analysis of campaigns therefore takes the form of asking whether those who are determining each candidate's strategy are making the right decision.[1]

What strategic decisions do the practitioners identify as important? Post-election reports of campaign success or failure rely on extensive ideographic explanations of candidate performance. *Campaigns & Elections*, the magazine written for the consulting industry, includes many post-election reviews written by campaign strategists. Typically, the explanations are unique to each election. One strategist, for example, argues that a congressional candidate won because she focused on national issues while her opponent attacked her political opportunism.[2] Another strategist contends that a congressional candidate won by regularly challenging the opponent to debate and by painting supporters of his

[1] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[2] Emily Pierce, "Drawing Contrasts Without Drawing Blood," *Campaigns & Elections* 22 (April 2001): 32.

opponent as "outsiders."[3] Another claims that a congressional incumbent successfully fought back against an interest group's ad campaign by cultivating free media coverage about the advertising.[4] These explanations are typical of the genre.

Rather than dismiss these claims entirely, it is worth considering the form they take and how they reach their conclusions. First, most practitioner explanations for victory imply multiple and conjunctural causality, with many different factors jointly affecting the outcome.[5] One consultant, for example, claims that a candidate lost because the attack ads they ran conflicted with the image as an outsider that the candidate was presenting.[6] A different consultant argues that a candidate won by relying on his credibility as a former legislative staffer and generating an important endorsement.[7] According to another post-election practitioner report, one candidate won their campaign for governor by staying positive, emphasizing grassroots tactics, and generating newspaper endorsements.[8] Another benefited from their campaign's slogan, their field operation, and their decision not to respond to an attack ad.[9]

In each case, these assessments cannot be analyzed simply by listing all of the factors judged important and assessing their individual importance. Practitioners imply multiple interaction effects; rather than specify a global model of candidate success, however, they individually evaluate the set of factors present in each campaign. Just as case study researchers respond to quantitative analysts by arguing that close case analysis is necessary to identify all plausible causal factors and interactions,[10] practitioners can legitimately say that most large-n analysis would fail to assess their specific claims.

Many of these ideographic explanations of campaign success are also framed in terms of a surprise victory. They take the form of an analysis of the "least likely case" in case study research, emphasizing how a good strategy can

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[3] Mary Claire Jalonick, "A Good Offense is the Best Defense," in *The Good Fight*, ed. Ronald A. Faucheux and Paul S. Herrnson (Washington: Campaigns and Elections, 2000).
[4] Philip Duncan, "The Election in the Cross Hairs," in *The Good Fight*, ed. Ronald A. Faucheux and Paul S. Herrnson (Washington: Campaigns and Elections, 2000).
[5] This form of causal argument is common in case study analysis. See Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
[6] Kristin Brainerd, "Three Davids, No Goliath and Plenty of Slingshots," *Campaigns & Elections* 20 (September 1999): 36.
[7] Greg Giroux, "Playing Catch-Up," *Campaigns & Elections* 22 (July 2001): 30.
[8] Bob Wickers and Dick Dresner, "Accentuating the Positive in Nebraska's GOP Race for Governor," *Campaigns & Elections* 19 (July 1998): 31.
[9] Tom O'Donnell and Mattis Goldman, "Beating the Odds; How the Right Candidate with the Right Message Pulled Two Upsets in One Year," *Campaigns & Elections* 24 (September 2003): 20.
[10] For examples of these claims, see Ragin, *The Comparative Method*.

work even when the obstacles seem insurmountable. One consultant, for example, claims that a candidate upset the likely victor by emphasizing trust and character, timing her advertising well, and concentrating on get-out-the-vote (GOTV) drives.[11] One "long-shot challenger" in a congressional race supposedly won by ignoring national issues, focusing on an early biographical ad, attacking the opponent for living outside the district, and involving the entire large staff in decision-making.[12] These practitioner explanations raise long-running debates about whether observers can gain additional leverage in assessing causality using non-random case selection.[13] If practitioners ignore campaign strategy in most elections but focus on a few where victory was unlikely, they may not provide sufficient evidence of causality but they may identify explanations that quantitative analysts of elections have yet to evaluate.

In practitioner analyses, few factors are judged too insignificant to affect election outcomes. Partial explanations for victory or defeat rely on decisions as obscure as hiring a local ad firm,[14] talking about legislative themes without using legislative language,[15] or avoiding a focus on generating media coverage in a fractured media market.[16] Scholars react with skepticism to the practitioner focus on minor decisions and to their inability to specify all potentially relevant factors in advance. Scholars are certainly correct to point out that practitioners have not proven the importance of these factors with a single example. Yet can we dismiss any of these factors without some analysis?

Post-election reports of single campaigns are not the only form of practitioner analysis. General prescriptive advice from consultants learned over many years of campaigning also highlights factors that academic observers either ignore or view as insignificant. Prominent advisor Peter Fenn, for example, suggests that a campaign's research budget and its knowledge of buying television time are underrated aspects of campaign success.[17] Another formula for candidate success, specific to incumbents, advises advertising early and emphasizing a public policy record.[18] These prescriptions can be evaluated more

[11] Sandra Basu, "Shelley Moore Capito's Uphill Climb," *Campaigns & Elections* 22 (March 2001): 22.
[12] Kevin McNeill and Cheryl Klock, "Connecticut Upset," *Campaigns & Elections* 22 (October 2001): 38.
[13] See Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Qualitative Research: Recent Developments in Case Study Methods," *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (January 2006): 455-476.
[14] Jalonick, "A Good Offense is the Best Defense."
[15] Larry Weitzner and Adam Geller, "Winning Tough Re-elections: Start with Early Media," *Campaigns & Elections* 20 (July 1999): 56-58.
[16] McNeill and Klock, "Connecticut Upset."
[17] Peter Fenn, "Hard Knocks: Lessons from Losing," *Campaigns & Elections* 24 (May 2003): 22.
[18] Weitzner and Geller, "Winning Tough Re-elections."

directly than case studies, since they are meant to apply to many campaigns rather than to explain a single instance of victory.

Yet the prescriptive rules for campaign success offered by practitioners are not always consistent. There are similar rules-of-thumb offered by many different consultants but they often conflict with other rules-of-thumb. This is because prescriptive advice from consultants is not meant to be applied universally. Strategists view their role as weighing the risks associated with each choice, knowing that they are likely to violate at least some rules-of-thumb. One set of advisors cites an example:[19]

> The team had to choose between responding to the attack or ignoring it and sticking with the endorsement spot. Here, one of the cardinal rules of politics (let no attack go unanswered) confronted one of the basic principles of sound strategy (control the definition of the campaign)… we reached a consensus not to let [an opponent's attack] drag us off message for the closing days of the campaign.

According to practitioners, good campaign decisions affect outcomes, but typically require weighing lots of conflicting prescriptive advice. In this case, for example, scholarship that sought to evaluate whether responding to attacks changes electoral outcomes would be attentive to only one generality among several used in any individual campaign decision.

Though the points of practitioner emphasis seem varied, there is some consistency. Practitioners judge each campaign decision with attention to the context of the race, but they consistently focus on the idea that candidates need an effective message. Most wins and losses are attributed to some fundamental success or failure related to a candidate's ability to construct an effective narrative of the campaign.[20] For example, Fenn argues that recent presidential campaigns came down to candidate messages:[21]

> Look at President George Bush in 1992. His campaign suffered because his advisers could not settle on a message. The same could be said of Al Gore in 2000 – whose advisers went back and forth between 'continue the peace and prosperity' and 'a fighter for the people, not the powerful.' Both lacked of clarity. By contrast, Bill Clinton was clear on placing the focus on the

[19] O'Donnell and Goldman, "Beating the Odds."
[20] Daniel M. Shea and Michael John Burton, *Campaign Craft: The Strategies, Tactics, and Art of Political Campaign Management* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2001).
[21] Fenn, "Hard Knocks: Lessons from Losing."

> economy and change, while Bush II hammered home 'compassionate conservatism.'

True or not, practitioners remember campaigns by the success or failure of the candidates' messages. The conventional wisdom among consultants is illustrated by this lesson learned by two campaign strategists, in another story of underdog triumph:[22]

> [This] story offers valuable lessons about how a candidate can win with less money and less establishment support than the opposition. The twin victories [in the primary and general election] illustrate the importance of having a message that suits both the candidate and the electorate, and demonstrate once again that success comes to campaigns that define the stakes of the election in their own terms.

Practitioners alternate between emphasizing lots of specific tactical moves and this central idea: candidates must have and communicate an effective message. Yet this idea of candidate message is not effectively captured in scholarship on campaigns. Scholars study which issues candidates address, how specifically they articulate their positions, and whether they focus on candidate characteristics or policy issues. These decisions are certainly components of campaign messages, but they largely ignore the practitioner emphasis. Practitioners seek to combine short slogans with related issue positions and biographical depictions that match the public mood. This consultant idea may be vague or hard to capture empirically, but scholars should not pretend that they have addressed it simply by tracking mentions of policy issues or candidate traits.

For practitioners, every detail of messaging, targeting, organizing, media production, and advertising is a potential factor in election outcomes. The most important campaign decision, however, is selecting a message and having the candidate act in accordance with the message. As a result, campaign analysis by practitioners tends to be torn between the notion that every decision matters and the perspective that the whole campaign usually comes down to one successful frame advanced by one of the candidates.

This practitioner emphasis drives the public and media debate about campaigns. Most media commentary revolves around campaign strategy, including the decisions made by consultants and their likely effects on election outcomes.[23] Media elites and a large portion of the public now view campaign strategists as more knowledgeable about elections than political scientists or other

[22] O'Donnell and Goldman, "Beating the Odds."
[23] See Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics*.

public intellectuals. Their perspective on campaigns largely determines how modern political history is written, especially explanations for victory and defeat in our collective memory. Yet scholars have not assessed their contribution, with an eye toward both its strengths and weaknesses.

Comparing the Evidence from Practitioners and Researchers

When scholars think about using evidence collected by political consultants, they primarily think about private data collections. Consultants, of course, conduct their own public opinion surveys and focus groups. They have access to first-hand data on media buys and information on expenditure decisions. They may even purchase customer information data designed for consumer products companies that academics do not access. Most political scientists would acknowledge some advantage associated with availability of this proprietary information; some scholars have already used this information for useful studies.[24] Yet, for the most part, these data sources are not responsible for the key differences between the knowledge base and theoretical frameworks of consultants and scholars.

Instead, the evidence that consultants bring to the analysis of how campaigns influence elections comes from close experience with a few campaigns. Like qualitative researchers engaging in participant observation, they look for turning points in sequences as well as similarities and differences across campaigns. Because they are practitioners rather than objective observers, however, they come to their study of campaigns with an applied sensibility. This creates an inevitable disjuncture between practitioners and political scientists that mirrors the differences between popular business writers and economists or practicing doctors and health researchers. These differences do not mean that business people, doctors, and consultants have nothing to add to research on economics, health, or politics. Making their knowledge useful, however, requires some translation. Table 1 illustrates the differences in learning style, standards for causality, and focus between practitioners and social scientists. Several basic differences in approach are evident.

[24] See Daron R. Shaw, *The Race to 270* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Table 1: Comparing Practitioners and Researchers

	Learning Style	**Standards for Causality**	**Focus**
Practitioners	Participant Observation	Did the factor seem to improve an unlikely candidate's prospects?	Impact of strategic decisions on election outcomes
Political Scientists	Data Analysis	Did the factor affect electoral outcomes, independent of other factors?	Impact of campaigns on voter decisions

As a result, these two types of investigators are not always talking about the same thing, even if they both seek to understand the effect of campaign actions on electoral outcomes:

- First, consultants are inevitably more fine-grained in their focus. Scholars seek to find the most important factors for explaining election outcomes, whereas practitioners seek small differences across campaigns that may account for marginal increases in the likelihood of a candidate victory.
- Second, consultants are more likely to be splitters than lumpers. They emphasize particular characteristics of candidates, districts, and campaigns that make each unique; scholars look for broad patterns.
- Third, consultants are more likely to have tacit knowledge, whereas scholars have explicit knowledge. Consultants apply lessons learned in past campaigns, including many that they do not openly acknowledge. Scholarship, in contrast, is built on explicating and sharing codified knowledge.
- Fourth, practitioners seek practical information, whereas scholars seek empirical information. Practitioners want to act, whereas scholars want to know. Practitioners, of course, want to know the best information before acting, but they are unconcerned with information that has little bearing on potential action. Scholars, for example, discuss how much campaigns influence voters, why turnout levels change over time, and how many congressional seats change partisan hands in each election. The answers to these questions would not help an individual consultant make a decision. Practitioners are only interested in knowledge about the impact of campaign decisions that are under the control of each candidate.

The practitioner emphasis on strategic interplay between candidates mirrors the focus of rational choice models. Both look for potential moves and countermoves among many actors. Yet their assumptions are quite distinct. Practitioners are interested in evaluating campaign decisions in which equivalently placed actors might choose different options. Their work in a campaign is premised on the notion that they are better prepared to make decisions on a candidate's behalf than the candidate. They speak of professional judgment, rather than rational action. Rational choice theorists and campaign practitioners both assume that all actors are trying to make the decisions most likely to lead to victory, but campaign practitioners rely on trial and error over multiple campaigns, rather than explicit mapping of options and implied consequences.

Given these different perspectives, how can scholarly research evaluate or inform practitioner analysis of campaigns? Post-election consultant reports of campaigns include endless speculation on the effects of every campaign decision. Obviously, scholars draw better conclusions from well-designed experiments of campaign tactics than strategists can from their post-hoc ideographic explanations. Similarly, observational research that accounts for differences across races other than campaign decisions is more likely to uncover the minimal influence of campaign decisions compared to all other factors that influence election outcomes. Yet we would be dismissing quite a lot of on-the-ground experience to ignore what practitioners believe they have learned.

Thus far, scholars have treated the two fields as if they have distinct approaches, one art and one science. Scholars assume that practitioner knowledge is unscientific and idiosyncratic, even if it may be useful. Yet scholars fail to notice that practitioner knowledge looks more like an underdeveloped science than an art. Practitioners do use a form of scientific testing, evaluating interventions in campaigns by their consequences. They accumulate only a small evidentiary record for their claims about the impact of campaign decisions on victory, however. We are left with a base of knowledge that cannot be regarded as confirmed but also cannot be treated as art. Rather than continue to proceed as if practitioners have not gathered any evidence for their views, we should assess the shared state of our knowledge.

The 2008 Democratic primary campaign provides an apt example of the difference in perspective between practitioners and scholars and the different lessons that may be learned. Scholars can find much evidence of the strength of our models of elections and campaign effects in the race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Demographics and political attitudes seem to explain variation in voting patterns among states and individuals, confirming some long-held ideas about voting behavior. There is also evidence of the many campaign effects found in recent literature, including momentum from wins in early states

as well as associations between media coverage, scandals, and poll numbers. Scholars looking for evidence of the effects of candidate visits, media tone, and advertising on voter turnout and vote choice will likely find it.

Yet practitioners will look at the same election with a different focus. In many of their minds, the 2008 primaries constitute an underdog victory and an example of a 50-50 election where candidate strategies made all the difference. The Obama campaign's decision to send many organizers to caucus states early led to large delegate hauls. Their attention to the long calendar and to the diverse rules for district delegate allocation among states led to better targeting of resources. Scholars will likely look at the election as evidence for momentum-based theories of the primary process and sociological theories of voting coalitions. Practitioners will look at the campaign as a singular instance of strategic interplay that worked to Obama's advantage.

These two perspectives, like most instances of practitioner and scholarly explanations, are not mutually exclusive. Both may offer important and interdependent variables for predicting electoral victories. Yet it is also incorrect to assert that practitioners and scholars are always talking about different things or that scholars explain the big picture while practitioners fill in the details. Instead, practitioners focus on non-obvious decisions under the control of each campaign. They believe that how these decisions are made often changes outcomes, even if the results will later be interpreted as consistent with broader theories of how elections are won and lost. Instead of focusing on routine decisions where all similarly placed candidates would make the same decisions, they focus on strategic decisions where professional judgment differs. Understanding campaigns requires internalizing their perspective and assessing their claims and evidence.

Scholars and practitioners, of course, share many areas of interest. First, scholars have long-studied the strategic allocation of resources in campaigns, the main task of campaign consultants.[25] Second, scholars look at candidate issue agendas, especially which issues they emphasize in advertising.[26] Practitioners often discuss which issues should be the focus of a candidate's campaign, even sometimes thinking in the same terms as scholars about whether to emphasize issues where the other party has a built-in advantage in public opinion. Third, scholarship has also considered the specificity of candidate issue positions, including whether ambiguity has benefits.[27] Consultants certainly help choose the language that candidates use to discuss their issue positions, including how specific to be in their proposals. Scholarship, in contrast, frames the ambiguity

[25] For example, see Shaw, *The Race to 270*.
[26] See John R. Petrocik, "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study," *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (October 1996): 825-850 and John Sides, "The Origins of Campaign Agendas," *British Journal of Political Science* 36 (2006): 407-436.
[27] Michael Alvarez, *Information and Elections* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997).

issue in terms of voter uncertainty about ideological positioning. Yet scholars and practitioners are considering the same decisions about issue position wording.

Fourth, scholars have considered voter mobilization techniques extensively, especially with field experiments on phone banks and door-to-door canvassing.[28] Practitioners make decisions about which techniques to use and when and where to use them in every campaign cycle. On this issue, practitioners have begun to consider political science evidence and incorporate it into campaign decisions. Fifth, scholars have long been interested in when and how to "go negative."[29] Practitioners speak in the same terms, with many of the same considerations in mind; they consider arguments advanced by their opponents, likely responses from media, voters and opponents, and timing. Consultants are sometimes dismissive of scholarship on negative campaigning but cite rules-of-thumb about when to use negativity that reach similar conclusions as the scholarship.

Given that scholars are already addressing questions of concern to practitioners, some may be dismissive of the need to learn much more from them. First, scholars might argue that they are focused on the most significant strategic decisions made by campaigns while practitioners are caught up in minutia. Second, scholars might contend that there is not enough variation to answer questions of concern to practitioners or that observational research cannot address some of their key concerns. The attitude seems to be that practitioners can help provide some ideas about new research areas but that scholars are best equipped to reach any definitive answers.

For several reasons, this resistance to practitioner knowledge is shortsighted. First, practitioners do consider factors that scholarship ignores but often do not assess their influence until after a campaign. Practitioners believe that campaign themes can be central to success, for instance, but would not say that a particular type of theme will always produce positive results. Practitioners also consider issues like press management, quick attack response, and field office organizing. In each case, they implement the best practices they know, even if they are unlikely to lead to success in any particular campaign. Second, practitioners offer unique knowledge, even where the issues they consider are the same as scholars investigate. Consultants typically consider qualifications and nuances with each rule-of-thumb. There is also a diversity of opinion within the

[28] See Donald P. Green, Alan S. Gerber, and David W. Nickerson, "Getting Out the Vote in Local Elections: Results from Six Door-to-Door Canvassing Experiments," *Journal of Politics* 65 (2003): 1083-96 and Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Matthew N. Green, "Partisan Mail and Voter Turnout: Results from Randomized Field Experiments," *Electoral Studies* 22 (2003): 563-579.

[29] David F. Damore, "Candidate Strategy and the Decision to Go Negative," *Political Research Quarterly* 55 (October 2002): 669-686.

consulting community that may lead to different decisions based on who is running a campaign.

The final reason not to ignore their claims is that ignoring them is not the same as reducing their influence. Practitioners are the main public voices in contemporary political discussion. Leaving their claims unchallenged reduces the impact of political science on public knowledge and leaves many of our audiences, including students and policymakers, cognizant only of the practitioner claims. Instead of resisting practitioner knowledge, scholars should incorporate and test empirical claims made by practitioners. That will take not only pursuing a few new empirical topics but also re-evaluating our theory of campaign decisions and effects.

Integrating Practitioner Ideas Into Theories of Campaign Strategy and Effects

Practitioners offer a working theory of how campaign decisions are made and how they may affect electoral outcomes. Their theoretical perspective incorporates some ideas common in political science but is not wholly consistent with any framework used in current research. Scholars who study campaigns and elections pride themselves on having moved beyond traditional analysis of voting behavior to notice and evaluate many hypothesized effects of political campaigns on voters. This is no small advance; all of the traditional schools of analysis of American voting behavior, after all, de-emphasized the role of campaigns. Psychological, sociological, and economic theories of voting all commonly ignored campaigns or seemed to assume that campaigns brought elections to a roughly predetermined equilibrium level of support for each candidate.[30] Yet while current scholarship has incorporated the role of campaigns in changing voter opinions, it has not yet fully assessed the role of the strategic decisions of campaign practitioners.

Three approaches to political science research on campaigns can help incorporate practitioner perspectives into future theories of campaign decisions. First, *the political communication approach* builds on scholarly analysis of media effects and public relations. According to this perspective, if voters are affected by media messages in general, they are also likely to be affected by the specific messages communicated by candidates. For example, some scholars review the tasks of political communication consultants and their similarities with other

[30] See Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), Bernard R. Berelson, William N. McPhee, and Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), and Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1957).

media actors.[31] Other scholars provide "strategic histories" of particular campaigns. In one set of these case studies, one candidate emphasizes his connection with the electorate, another goes negative on an obvious opponent weak point, another establishes an image as a maverick, another attempts to appease the base and move to the center, and another pre-empts their key strategic challenge.[32] This approach, however, is atypical. The political communication framework is traditionally most focused on agenda setting, priming, and framing – it adapts these ideas from analysis of media coverage to studies of campaigns.

Second, the related *political marketing approach* emphasizes the similarities and differences between traditional consumer marketing and political campaigns. This literature is concentrated in Europe and features commentary by scholars at marketing and business schools. In a collection of this research, scholars debate the concept of political marketing, the role of campaign management, methods of campaign research, campaign messages, and non-candidate actors.[33] The volume includes several chapters of hints from practitioners on fundraising, message development, polling, and tactics. This approach assumes that practitioners have an array of potentially successful strategies for influencing voters but fails to test them.

Third, extensions of *game-theoretic analysis* of campaigns offer a more limited view of practitioner strategy but emphasize the effects of campaign decisions rather than all campaign activity. Many examples of game-theoretic work on campaigns focus on negative campaigning. Scholars argue that in two-person races, the front-runner should be more positive; in three candidate races, the candidate with the least support should be entirely positive; in both cases, negativity will always be directed at the front-runner.[34] There are also many formal models of issue positioning that elaborate the median voter model. As in most game-theoretic analysis, this literature argues that campaign decisions are the result of similar calculations by all actors rather than specific decisions by one actor with a superior intellect for strategy. The models focus on strategic interplay between candidates but rely on assumptions of universal strategic foresight by candidates.

In other words, game-theoretic analysis of campaigns puts the focus on strategic decisions and their interdependence, but it assumes that everyone sees the game board similarly and that each equivalently placed actor will make the same decisions. This ignores the internal debates about effective strategy among

[31] Karen S. Johnson-Cartee, and Gary A. Copeland, *Inside Political Campaigns: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CN: Prager, 1997).
[32] Shea and Burton, *Campaign Craft*.
[33] Bruce I. Newman, ed., *Handbook of Political Marketing* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Praeger, 1999).
[34] Stergios Skaperdas and Bernard Grofman, "Modeling Negative Campaigning," *American Political Science Review* 89 (October 1995): 49-61.

campaign consultants and the process of developing rules-of-thumb in that profession. The goal of strategic thinking in campaigns is, of course, to influence voters. The political communication approach is concerned primarily with these effects on voters but is not as attentive to how strategy is formulated in a competitive arena or learned in the profession.

I illustrate these differences among the three approaches in Table 2. To understand the potential effects of campaign decisions, we have to combine the best of each theoretical approach. In political communication studies, scholars are engaged in their own analysis of what works with voters, paralleling the interests of practitioners but not their process of evaluation. In political marketing, scholars are attuned to the process by which conventional wisdom develops and to debates about strategic considerations but they tend to replicate consultant thinking rather than to assess its likely influence. In game-theoretic analysis of campaigns, scholars look for the interdependent nature of strategic decisions but do not assess the process by which consultants make decisions in an environment where no one knows for sure what works.

Table 2: Theoretical Frameworks for Campaign Strategy Research

	Implied Analogy	**Example**	**Limitation**
Political Communication	Media Effects	Does advertising affect turnout?	Rarely considers strategic interaction
Political Marketing	Consumer Advertising	How do candidates build political brands?	Rarely offers testable hypotheses
Rational Choice	Conflict	When is it in a candidate's interest to go negative?	Assumes all actors see the game similarly

Scholars must revise their theories of campaigns to incorporate both ideas about the causes of campaign decisions and their effects. Political communication and marketing approaches make implicit analogies to studies of media and

consumer marketing; political campaigns are likely to be analogous to these areas in some ways and different in others. These theories often assume that some type of professional judgment causes campaigns to pursue the strategies they choose. Game-theoretic approaches to campaign decision-making, in contrast, emphasize how similarly placed candidates would make the same decisions.

We need to combine theories of the causes of strategic decisions with theories of the effects of campaigns. We know that consultants make decisions with an eye to winning elections but do so with incomplete and conflicting information and in response to salient historical lessons. As a result, there is much unexplained campaign variation based on strategic decisions that are not discernable by simply knowing the objective circumstances of each election. Different decisions made in similar circumstances may affect election outcomes or may be inconsequential. We need to know how they are made, how different the resulting campaigns are, and how well voters respond to each style of campaign. Yet we are unlikely to get very far thinking about each set of questions individually. In order to know whether the decisions themselves might be influential in determining election outcomes, we need to know which campaign decisions are obvious outcomes of the circumstances of a race and which are judgment calls that vary among consultants.

Our Capacity for Measuring the Effects of Campaign Decisions

The underutilized literature on the determinants of campaign strategy suggests that real campaign decisions are a mixture of obvious responses to electoral context and unique decisions made by individual candidates and their consultants. In addition to tracking consultant recommendations on campaign strategy and the content of their communications, some academic researchers seek to explain why consultants choose certain strategies in particular circumstances. Rather than credit consultants with innovative strategic decisions, this research program offers evidence that candidates often have little room to maneuver. Candidates in similar electoral circumstances, many scholars argue, tend to choose similar strategies. Some scholars contend that when these contextual features of a race are taken into account, independent campaign decisions are not very influential.

One study, for example, argues that state legislative election outcomes are produced by situational factors such as incumbency, candidate quality, and insufficient financial support rather than by a campaign's relative focus on turnout, persuasion, endorsements, and fundraising.[35] In this study, Louisiana house and senate candidates pursued distinct mixes of strategies, but the only strategic choice that may have had an effect on outcomes was a challenger focus

[35] Susan E. Howell, "Campaign Activities and State Election Outcomes," *Political Behavior* 4 (December 1982): 401-417.

on fundraising. In senate races, however, the study did find that focusing on direct voter contact techniques is beneficial to candidates without elite support.

Though studies comparing campaign decisions and contextual factors are rare, many studies demonstrate that context drives major strategic decisions. One scholar, for example, argues that congressional candidates determine their strategies based on obvious background features such as incumbency and district partisanship.[36] Another demonstrates that decisions about whether to use mass media or direct contact in state legislative races are determined by the character of districts rather than candidate types, expenditure levels, or competition.[37] In this study, population density and congruence between district boundaries and media markets are the most important factors in driving decisions about campaigning; open seat races also feature some differences. Each of these studies attempts to study the determinants of strategy and outcomes jointly to see if strategy matters independently of other factors that affect outcomes.

The most successful area of study for this type of analysis is resource allocation with regard to the Electoral College. One scholar finds that presidential nominees alter media buys and candidate schedules in response to shifts in state public opinion and that these alterations have independent effects on voter decisions.[38] Whether or not these campaign decisions are rational strategies designed to win elections, scholars have been able to predict candidate behavior based on background features. Other research, for example, finds that campaigns allocate organizational and staff funds in order to satisfy internal constituencies but allocate advertising and candidate appearances strategically to win votes.[39]

The key finding from these studies is that many decisions follow from the basic characteristics of a campaign and set of candidates. Other decisions, however, are untested strategies promoted by some campaign consultants. In order to know if candidate decisions affect election outcomes, we have to be able to separate the inevitable decisions from those where candidates or their advisors have real agency. That is likely to require a theoretical approach to campaigns that combines the attention to strategic development in theories of political communication and marketing with the attention to objective circumstances in game-theoretic analysis.

Moving forward will require more than analysis of every individual campaign decision. One important place to start is to investigate decisions that

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[36] Patrick J. Sellers, "Strategy and Background in Congressional Campaigns," *American Political Science Review* 92 (October 1998): 159-171.
[37] Robert E. Hogan, "Voter Contact Techniques in State Legislative Campaigns: The Prevalence of Mass Media Advertising," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 22 (December 1997): 551-571.
[38] See Shaw, *The Race to 270*.
[39] Larry M. Bartels, "Resource Allocation In a Presidential Campaign," *Journal of Politics* 47 (October 1985): 928-936.

practitioners view as important but disagree enough to produce variation in strategy across campaigns. Despite our dismissal of many of the factors they highlight, many consultant claims may be falsifiable and not yet tested. Our default stance should be that we are ignorant of the potential effects of campaign decisions, not that they have no effects. We should not claim null findings until we have assessed the alternatives.

Even if we reformulate theory, there will still be problems in translation between practitioner claims and scholarly tests. Just as management scholars make large claims that cannot easily be tested by economists, consultants make pronouncements that are sometimes difficult to interpret or impossible to test on available data. Yet we are still learning from the same elections. If we try proactively to isolate the effects of strategic decisions in campaigns, we will be able to learn as much as can be definitively learned by scholars or practitioners.

In the end, we may find that scholars are interested in explaining the bulk of variation across campaigns whereas practitioners are interested in small effects on outcomes that may make a difference in a few cases. Scholars may claim that if 95% of variation in outcomes is explained, the final 5% is random, while practitioners claim that they are only trying to influence the final portion of variation. Practitioners and scholars may never be able to come to agreement on the importance of these small potential effects. Yet we should at least be able to establish whether strategic decisions affect the campaigns that voters experience, even if they do not lead to changes in electoral outcomes.

If candidates and their advisors are employing a range of strategies, some of which are direct responses to the campaign environment, how should scholars evaluate the effects of strategic decisions on voters? Traditionally, scholars have been more concerned with establishing campaign effects generally. Some have focused on the effect of campaign expenditures on voting behavior, for example; others have focused on the effects of campaign advertising.[40] These studies, however, are not about tactical and strategic decisions. Candidates spend what they raise rather than decide how much to spend. Likewise, every major campaign focuses on television advertising. The goal in most studies of campaigns is thus to determine whether any campaigning affects voter decision-making.

The first research question was whether campaigns have any potential effect on electoral outcomes. The campaign effects literature has generally mirrored the media effects literature in transitioning from a binary debate over whether there are any effects to an understanding that campaigns have multiple

[40] See Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 7th Ed (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009) for spending effects and Gregory A. Huber and Kevin Arceneaux, "Identifying the Persuasive Effects of Presidential Advertising," *American Journal of Political Science* 4 (October 2007): 957-977 for advertising effects.

types of effects in many different circumstances.[41] Yet the research program remains somewhat limited by its original formulation, with scholars arguing against the null hypothesis of no campaign effects rather than the null hypothesis of no effects of particular strategic choices made differently in each campaign.

One closer attempt to assess the impact of the strategies practitioners choose is to look at the effect of hiring consultants. Some scholars have found that hiring campaign consultants helps congressional candidates win elections.[42] Even with controls for competitiveness and party affiliation and after accounting for the potential for reverse causality, the consultant effect remains. Yet this research is no longer applicable to an environment in which all major candidates have consultants. When consultants are universal, it is difficult to isolate their effect. Scholars have found that campaign professionalism (having more consultants) increases a candidate's fundraising success.[43] Thus there is some evidence of the effect of more consultants, but the dependent variable is no longer voter decisions. Furthermore, this is still not evidence that particular types of strategic decisions made by consultants affect election outcomes.

Several research strategies may allow scholars to make more progress assessing the effect of campaign decisions. I illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in Table 3. First, comparative analysis of campaign behavior across different electoral races allows scholars to track similarities and differences in candidate and voter behavior and tie variation to campaign circumstances. For example, studies that compare across Senate or House elections enable scholars to demonstrate that certain campaign decisions are automatic responses to campaign environments and others are unique strategies pursued by particular types of candidates or consultants.[44] These studies are generally best at predicting electoral outcomes, however, rather than analyzing the ebb and flow of voter support for candidates during the campaign.

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[41] See James E. Campbell, *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), Thomas M. Holbrook, *Do Campaigns Matter?* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), and Shanto Iyengar and Adam F. Simon, "New Perspectives and Evidence on Political Communication and Campaign Effects," *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 (2000): 149-169.

[42] See Stephen K. Medvic and Silvo Lenart, "Campaign Tactics and the Decision to Attack," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 22 (October 1997): 61-77.

[43] Paul Herrnson, "Campaign Professionalism and Fund-Raising in Congressional Elections," *Journal of Politics* 54 (1992): 859-70.

[44] For example, see Sides, "The Origins of Campaign Agendas."

Table 3: Methods of Testing the Effects of Campaign Decisions

	Example	**Strength**	**Weakness**
Comparative Analysis Across Campaigns	When do candidates talk about the same policy issues?	Takes structural factors into account	Inattentive to strategic decisions made in each campaign
Assessing Change in Opinion During One Campaign	Do negative ads increase political information?	Analyzes how campaigns change opinions	Limited applicability to other campaigns with different features
Experiments on Campaign Tactics	Does door-to-door voter contact increase turnout?	Isolates causal effect of campaign tactics	Often fails to replicate real-world campaigns

Second, studies of changes in voter intentions over single campaigns may allow scholars to assess whether changes in strategies affect voters. Most research in this area has taken the traditional form, asking whether advertising expenditures or messages affect voters.[45] Recent evidence has taken it a step further, asking whether voters in battleground states and areas that candidates visit change their voting intentions during campaigns. Some research has connected this evidence with candidate strategies, arguing that candidates succeed in changing voter opinions when they present messages on wedge issues that appeal to voters whose issue positions are incongruent with their partisanship.[46] Up to now, however, there has been little effort to track the decisions made by consultants in any single campaign and match them up to day-to-day changes in voter intentions; this is the method most often used during campaigns by practitioners to assess their own strategies. Rather than accept the practitioners' post-hoc recollections of their successes and failures, scholars may gain from

[45] For example, see Stephen C. Craig, James G. Kane, and Jason Gainous, "Issue Related Learning in a Gubernatorial Campaign: A Panel Study," *Political Communication* 22 (2005): 483-503.
[46] See D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

following their day-to-day changes in messaging, targeting, and attack and response, linking the public displays like advertising and speeches to the internal decisions made by practitioners. Ideally, scholars could observe the internal strategic decisions, the public displays that result from them, and the effects on voters discernable from changes in public opinion throughout the campaign.

An alternative is experiments that attempt to isolate the effect of particular strategic decisions.[47] Since experiments allow researchers to eliminate the threat of confounds, scholars can directly manipulate the proposed strategies and see if they result in changes in voter intentions. Lab experiments of the campaign message environment may help fill in some of the gaps in scholarly knowledge.[48] Field experiments of campaign strategies may allow researchers to avoid the unrealistic environment of simulated electoral circumstances in the lab. Unfortunately, large-scale experiments of voter messaging and targeting strategies designed to persuade voters have been limited. Experiments offer the promise of causal inference but the difficulty of assessing how actions and counteractions among candidates play out in a real campaign. Research on randomized television advertising buys may help alleviate this downside, observing how voter intentions change in response to how candidates and their opponents target their advertising.[49]

Using each method, scholars should be conscious that many of the ideas that we are testing are quite different from those of practitioners. We have largely ignored some areas of their focus, including opposition research, ad buying, and persuasive direct mail. As noted, scholars have also not captured the concept of a candidate's message put forward by practitioners and analyzed by media pundits. A recent dissertation using consultant interviews finds that candidate messages most often stem from candidate biographies.[50] Yet scholars have not looked across many cases to see if these messages are a natural outgrowth of campaign circumstances or independent decisions made by practitioners. There has been little attempt to assess quantitatively the effect of a campaign's central message on voting intentions. We do not even know how much variation there is across campaigns with regard to their central message.

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[47] For example, see Green, Gerber, and Nickerson, "Getting Out the Vote in Local Elections."

[48] For example, see Michael F. Meffert, Sungeun Chung, Amber Joiner, Leah Waks, and Jennifer Garst, "The Effects of Negativity and Motivated Information Processing During a Political Campaign," *Journal of Communication* 56 (January 2006): 27-51.

[49] See Donald Green, Sunshine Hillygus, John Sides, and Daron Shaw. "The Influence of Television and Radio Advertising on Candidate Evaluations: Results from a Large Scale Randomized Experiment" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, Apr 12, 2007.

[50] See Brian Kearney, Resume Politics: How Campaigns Use Background Appeals to Win Votes and Elections (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2007).

In measuring the effects of campaign decisions, however, scholars should not limit themselves to assessing those outcomes that practitioners seek to influence. For example, the literature on the rise of consultants has concluded that consultants do affect candidates and parties, even if they fail to move votes. This literature primarily tracks the professionalization of campaigns. According to this research, political consultants now make a campaign's primary decisions and have changed norms about messages, strategies, and style.[51] Other scholars argue that campaigns are now more centralized, tasks are more specialized, and experts are relied upon to make most decisions.[52] Consultants are also sometimes seen as enablers of candidate-centered campaigns that reduce the influence of political parties.[53] Other scholars see campaign consultants as modernizers of political parties.[54]

If the general use of consultants may have all of these unintended effects, scholars should also look for evidence that particular strategic decisions have unintended consequences. A tendency to hold negative attacks until the end of campaigns, for example, may fail to influence vote choice but produce more negative assessments of politicians generally. A decision to focus on three issues per advertising campaign may reduce the public's perception of the size of the agenda of important problems even if it is not more effective as a campaign strategy. In each case, scholars should attempt to take consultant claims seriously but not underestimate the potential for their strategic decisions to produce unintended outcomes even if they are unsuccessful in achieving their goals.

If we do not take practitioner analysis of campaigns seriously enough to test their explanations for victory or defeat, however, political science will not offer much to practitioners or help the public understand why candidates make particular decisions. We are likely to find that many decisions thought to be important have no bearing on success of failure. Listening to practitioners, however, may also provide insight into some missing variables in scholarly analysis of elections. Scholars could also seek to uncover the effects of campaign decisions on dependent variables that are not of interest to consultants, such as confidence in political institutions.

Strategists at least pretend to know something that scholars do not about modern campaigns. They analyze different factors and imply causal relationships that scholars have not found. Yet there is more to the story than bold assertions

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[51] Larry Sabato, *The Rise of Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).
[52] Darren G. Lilleker, and Ralph Negrine, "Professionalism: Of What? Since What? By Whom?" *Harvard Journal of Press/Politics* 7 (December 2002): 98-103.
[53] See Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics: Presidential Elections of the 1980s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
[54] See Anthony Broh, "Polls, Pols and Parties," *Journal of Politics* 45 (October 1983): 732-744.

without evidence. Because scholars have formulated their research with different questions in mind, they have not even tested many of the claims made every election by practitioners and pundits. Scholars still tend to think in terms of media effects, because that literature formed the basis of the new literature on campaigns. A literature that is directly related to the concerns of practitioners thus does not currently inform consultant thinking. Likewise, consultant ideas drive candidate decision-making without being taken seriously in political science. As a result, one of the best opportunities to relate political science research to real-world concerns about the political process remains unfulfilled.