



Role of political consultancies in Indian politics–Undermining democracy

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Abstract

Around the world, the practice of politics has taken a turn toward “professionalization.” A key political actor that is facilitating this change is the political consultant. However, despite the influential role that consultants play in contemporary politics, they have been subject to little scholarly attention. We introduce a study on political consultants for the context of India, a large middle-aged democracy that has seen a growing presence of consultants over the last two decades. The 2014 and 2019 general elections in India were referred to as “WhatsApp elections,” which had IT cells, bots, and political consultants strategically using data mining tools to build resonant narratives to tell voters what they wanted to hear. By the 2014 national election, the industry was reported to be worth \$40–\$47 million. Between 2014 and 2018, industry specialists approximated that the number of firms in this market had at least doubled. These unprecedented tools of technological campaigning come with new forms of identifying, targeting, and defining issues of political importance.

Keywords: politics, consultancies, democracy

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the practice of politics in many countries has undergone a transformation. Traditional methods of appealing for votes through door-to-door campaigns have given way to new modes of broadcasting through the television or via the Internet, and “narrow-casting” by transmitting targeted messages over social media. Election manifestos are no longer drawn out through a long process of engagement with party members and civil society; rather, they are more likely to be constructed within the closed doors of campaign offices based on inputs gathered from a survey carried out by an agency. Further, the length of political campaigns, which were earlier spread over a few months prior to an election, seems to have got extended. These disparate changes have been described by scholars of politics as a collective movement toward the “professionalization of politics.” At the heart of this shift toward professionalization is the emergence and growth of a new breed of political actors, referred to as political consultants. Although the most important role of political consultants is arguably the development and production of mass media (largely television and direct mail), consultants advise campaigns on many other activities, ranging from opposition research and voter polling, to field strategy and get out the vote efforts.

Challenging the traditional role of cadre

Any mainstream party, regional or national, has structures from the village to state level, including booth committees, youth wings and wings for particular communities. Positions within these structures are assigned to karyakartas (cadre), empowering them to work harder and more effectively for the party. From the outside, this looks like a strong form of party organisation; from the inside, however, one realises how loosely-tied the links in such an organisation can be. To make their work easier for the elections, parties are now outsourcing the work of organising these loose structures to private consultancies. The immediate problem is dismantling the authority of the local cadre leaders. They often resent the political

consultancy, which has to take over monitoring, training and commanding the local cadre and structure. Consultants prepare regular progress reports on these structures; at the party level, they even report on the MLA and MP candidates, based on which the party high-command announces the final candidate lists.

The data hazard

A consultancy is only as good as the information it can obtain, however – which creates a new moral hazard around the use of state data. In a recent case of data theft, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) provided a variety of classified data on the citizens of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to a company, IT Grids. This information was leaked from the government – which means the ruling party misused UID information to profile voters. The “TRS mission-call campaign” mobile app and website to coordinate between the party and its cadre runs on the similar basis. Before it was controversially shut down, the chairperson of consultancy, Social Post, handled it and had access to all information it collected.

Profiling by consultancy firms happens at multiple levels. First, party supporters and non-supporters are identified – as are neutral voters, the most important segment of voters for a political party. Next, beneficiaries of various schemes are listed. Finally, just before the election, a list of who is voting for the party and who is not will be prepared, as neutral votes would by then have been consolidated. At the end, they will have the castes, income sources and socio-economic conditions of all these people. Armed with this data, an action plan is prepared and door-to-door campaigns designed. An exercise like this, on such a large scale, has never before been a part of India’s elections. The data set belongs to the private political consultancies. As the firms gain prominence with each passing election, they could potentially have the power to influence governments. The other threat is if a big corporate realizes this potential and enters this field, it will have tremendous influence on Indian elections as it would attempt to bring the party it favors to power.

Managing Election Campaigns

Electing political representation is the cornerstone of a representative democracy. Yet, the liberal democratic process also claims to account for minority protection, constitutional rule of law, checks and balances, and the accountable dispersal of power. In India, since 2014, the mechanisms of national election campaigns are gradually being handed over to political consultants. Young graduates of the sciences, technology, engineering, and management who use data mining and strategic technological targeting to effectively tell voters what they want to hear are taking on roles of political consultants. On the other hand, foot soldiers, cadres, and on-the-ground party workers continue to do the work in a traditional party structure. However, they are increasingly directed by young professionals working as political consultants with the legitimacy from the top party leadership. Fundamentally, political consultants work with parties to win elections.

Cost of consultancies

The rate for hiring a consultancy range from a few lakhs for individual clients to well over a hundred crore for big parties. The consultancy charged for the duration of the service—between Rs 25 lakh and Rs 30 lakh for a six-month minimum period. A TDP candidate for the Guntur assembly seat opted in just before the polls and was charged just Rs 5 lakh.

The Discourse of ‘Fixing’ a Corrupt Politics

In June 2019, through a brief exchange with Prashant Kishor, the political consultant known to have “revolutionised election campaigning” in India, some interesting insights came out. During this conversation, Kishor revealed that he sees professionals in democracy as able to combine “professional” processes (that is, technological efficiency and strategic planning) with modes of representative democracy. However, he explained his desire to distance himself from dominant conceptions of global political consulting. According to him, “the participation of professionals in democracy, especially in electoral politics” in India is different from “political consultancies in the West.”

Here, Kishor makes a key distinction between professionals in India deepening civic participation and political consultancies in the West stifling democracy through data mining and manipulative targeting (that is, Cambridge Analytica). However, the validity of this claim is debatable. According to Kishor, the participation of professionals in a democracy is understood to improve civic confidence and engagement in an otherwise defunct political system. Professionals who distance from politics see themselves as able to “fix” the system, while remaining unencumbered by irrational partisanship. They see themselves as post-ideological. The relatively recent development of these trends makes it difficult to claim tangible implications of these changes for democracy.

Business of Politics

Turning politics into a profitable business, the consulting fees charged by IPAC and other firms count on their consultants having graduated from elite technical universities. The introduction of anonymous electoral bonds into elections in 2018 allows political parties to amass large funds from business lobbies without any transparency. Con-

sequently, allowing political parties that have amassed large amounts of funding and/or corporate support to take advantage of this professionalization. A former IPAC employee lays out the profile that matters to political consulting firms and to their clients: middle-class graduates from elite universities and/or branded pedigrees of work experience.

In the 2019 national election, economic issues were framed discursively and messaged through a nationalist logic such that people believed that Modi’s larger interest lay in what is good for “the people” and for India’s global glory. Despite record unemployment rates in 2020 and the growing economic downturn, he claims to understand their needs and can “get things done.” The strong organisation of the party cadre managed to transmit messages throughout towns, cities, and villages, thus building favour based on the welfare schemes and issues of caste and religious identity within them. Party workers and foot soldiers worked along with two consulting firms—Jarvis Consulting and ABM. They reached out to constituents who have benefited or been offered key welfare schemes. They targeted messages according to the caste and religious demographics of an area. These targeted messages would further build imagined enemies and encourage voters to vote for the party that would address the needs of their community. A former member of the BJP disclosed how the party could appear aggressively pro-Hindu nationalist to some voters and development oriented to others. They could sell themselves as anti-cow slaughter in Uttar Pradesh, while appearing ambivalent to it in the North-East.

The top leadership continued to reach out to party workers and supporters through a nationwide proprietary Na Mo phone app. While social and traditional media worked to circulate a range of desires appealing to material needs, symbolic needs (something to fight for that is national security and nationhood), and aspirations of moral and material desires along with othering imagined enemies (someone to blame). A former consultant explained how this data would come from multiple sources and be supplemented by focus group discussions, call centres, recorded calls, WhatsApp groups, and consultants assigned to each individual page of voter lists in a constituency.

Conclusion

Populist demand to oust the “elites” and represent the “people” in government tend to trust the “outsider” to enter and fix the system. In the Indian case, this is accompanied by discrediting elite “intellectuals” and a heightened credibility attached to a cultural, apolitical technocratic expertise. The influence of skyrocketing technocratic and political professionalization over the last decade can be tracked through a growth in the participation of consulting firms, think tanks, political consultants, and the outsourcing of elections as brand management. The key here is where the government and political parties have begun to seek input—rather than from non-governmental organisations, civil society, and grassroots movements, they seek professional input from data consultants, policy professionals, and management consultants. This is not entirely new. But the extent of it has emphasised the shift in whose ideas are valued. Political consultants are being hired to direct party workers. Democratic participatory voices are replaced by the influence of think tanks and consulting firms. While the political and policy consultants see themselves as being “outside of” politics and governance and thus outside of

hegemony, their work of “rational calculation” and their perception of their work is at the frontlines of transforming everyday practices of governance and political discourse.

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