



The Value of Experience

July 2001 Edition

By M. Dane Waters ¹

What is the role of a political consultant? Many would argue that it is to use the tools of their trade – direct mail, television and radio advertising, polling and coalition building, to name a few – to educate the voters on how to cast their vote on election day. Political consulting in the United States has become a very profitable business and its importance in political campaigns is unquestionable. But what about the rest of the world?

Political consulting and consultants do exist in other countries – in Europe for example, the growth of the industry has been unparalleled. Most of this growth has been in the area of national referendums that have proliferated throughout the continent with the creation of the European Union (EU). Votes on the Maastricht Treaty (the basic acceptance of a country to join the EU) and the establishment of a single European currency – the Euro – has been the root of much of the growth. Sometime over the next two years one of the most important national referendums on the continent will take place – the vote on whether or not the United Kingdom will adopt the Euro. This vote will no doubt have tremendous repercussions on not only the European economy but also the world's economy. There is no doubt that the political consulting industry will play heavily in this election and will use their arsenal of tools to affect the outcome of this important vote.

But are political consultants active in other parts of the world? Of course the answer is yes, but the amount of activity is directly tied to the amount of money that can be made. For example, there is no doubt that the reason you have a more active industry in the United States and in the United Kingdom than you do in Somaliland or New Guinea is due to the fact that there is a large disparity in the amount of money that can be made between these countries. There is nothing wrong with this – it is capitalism at its best, but the losers in this equation are the voters in the countries where the political industry is lacking. They are the losers because they don't get the benefit of the professional consultants using their tools to help educate the voters on the candidates or the referendums they will be voting on.

Now there are many of you reading this who will undoubtedly think that I have gone off the deep end by saying that political consultants are good for Democracy – but they are. The most important thing in any free country is an informed electorate. The electorate who are casting votes for the leaders of their countries who will be responsible for committing troops to foreign conflicts; the electorate who will be voting on important national referendums – like the Euro – that will affect the world as a whole; the electorate that will be voting on whether to succeed from an existing nation and claim their independence for the entire world to see.

Political consultants help keep the electorate informed – but it seems only in the countries where the cold hard cash is calling their name. As I said, there is nothing wrong with

¹ Dane is President and Founder of the Initiative & Referendum Institute, a non-profit non-partisan educational and research organization dedicated to the study of the initiative and referendum process.

this, but I believe that these consultants should look pass the money on occasion and lend their expertise to elections in countries whose electorate could benefit from their services but who can't afford the cost of hiring professionals. In short – do some pro bono work. I know that consultants already do some pro bono work for causes they believe in, but I am talking more about helping the citizens in developing democracies – like Somaliland, a nation in Western Africa that just held a national referendum on a new constitution. Neither the Government nor any advocacy groups in the country had the funds or the expertise necessary to properly educate the 2.5 million inhabitants on the referendum. They did the best they could – but here is a perfect example where the political consultants who are well versed in initiative and referendum campaigns could have offered for free their services to the Government – and to the opposition as well – in order to help educate the voters.

Whenever there is a natural disaster around the world, doctors, nurses, bricklayers, carpenters and thousands of other professionals offer their help – for free. I think it is time for the political consulting industry to reach out and offer their expertise to the citizens around the world who are working hard at establishing a truly free and democratic government – the entire world will benefit.