



How Grassroots Lobbying Consultants are Reshaping Public Participation in Policy Battles

Edward Walker, University of California-Los Angeles

For most people, grassroots activism brings to mind voluntary efforts mounted by community organizations, social movements, and citizen leaders. But today some of the most prominent mobilizers of mass public participation are consultants selling their services to corporations, industry associations, and other clients with interests in fights over legislation, ballot measures, and rulings by public agencies. Known as “public affairs consultants” or “grassroots lobbyists,” these paid experts seek out members of the general public who can help their client to win important policy battles. My research looks closely at these influential political professionals.

The Birth and Growth of Paid Grassroots Lobbying

In the United States and beyond, public interest advocacy groups proliferated starting in the 1970s – during the same era that businesses often felt on the defensive against expanded government regulation to further social rights, environmental improvements, and health and safety goals. As new public interest groups displayed the power of citizen organizing, some business leaders started looking for ways to adapt their own versions of this approach. And there were professionals on hand to respond to corporate needs, because electoral campaign consultants were on the rise and looking for sources of revenue in between election cycles. By adding new corporate clients, they could sell packages of services including public relations advice, advertising and social media, and organizing outreach.

Several decades later, this new breed of what journalist Thomas Edsall calls “unlobbyists” has become a prominent player in American democracy, scrambling the division between “inside” and “outside” categories of political influence. Most people expect major corporations and other well-positioned interest groups to rely on insider strategies like lobbying, making campaign contributions, and providing testimony, leaving citizen and activist groups to make noise through mass participation campaigns. But when powerful organizations such as *Fortune 500* firms fear that they might be on the losing end of a policy battle, they are willing to use populist outsider strategies too. They are glad to hire professionals who can activate not only their normal constituency of managers, shareholders, distributors, and employees, but also members of the mass public – including their consumers, local community members, and others who may have a stake in the issue along with the firm or industry group.

How They Do It

Public affairs consultants serve many clients – about 40% of the *Fortune 500* appears on their aggregate client lists. Aggressive campaigns orchestrated by paid consultants tend to target over 750,000 Americans for involvement during the undertakings. Campaign goals and methods cover a wide range.

- In 2010, the **for-profit college industry** waged a fight against the Department of Education’s “gainful employment” rule, which would have imposed new restrictions on federal student aid to institutions whose students had low rates of loan repayment and high debts in relation to their incomes. Hired consultants created student activist organizations to fight the proposed rule as an unfair restriction on their access to education.
- In the 2005-07 **“Working Families for Wal-Mart” campaign**, the Walmart company retained a major consulting firm to recruit suppliers, customers, local residents, and other groups to push back against criticism from public officials and two union-backed campaigns.
- In 2008, the **Canadian National Railway** hired professional consultants to mobilize local residents in favor of its acquisition of the Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern Railway. Consultants sought support from residents who would benefit from the railway purchase, and helped them counter other residents who feared harm from the railway purchase.

In each of these cases, consultants helped to identify constituencies that would be likely to support their client’s goals and offered those potential supporters information and venues to raise their voices. In effect, consultants offered client firms and industries ways to replicate strategies previously developed and deployed by grassroots citizen organizers.

Effects and Future Directions

Paid mobilizers certainly draw more people into public campaigns. But they also may exacerbate rather than reduce inequalities of participation in U.S. democracy, because consultants target groups and citizens who are mostly likely to say “yes” to their campaigns. Such people tend to be the ones already active in the U.S. political process.

Consultants and their clients often face the charge that their campaigns are “astroturf” efforts with fake grassroots support. Such charges are reasonable when campaigns rely heavily on material incentives or fraudulent appeals – or go so far as to create a front group as a masquerade. For example, in 2009 it came out that an operative had forged letters favoring “clean coal” that purported to have been sent by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This is an extreme case, yet consultants are often not transparent about their work.

However, evidence in my study suggests that campaigns can be successful and deflect accusations when consultants discover and engage groups that have a genuine, independent interest in the client’s cause. That is, campaigns are more successful when they look more like conventional grassroots mobilization efforts.

Whatever one may conclude about their positive and negative features, grassroots campaigns for hire are likely here to stay. Consultants use effective tactics and deploy new technologies – and powerful clients benefit from these campaigns. Because the activities of paid campaign consultants are protected under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, regulation has proved very difficult. As firms, industry groups, and advocacy organizations continue to battle in the highly partisan contemporary U.S. public sphere, paid consultants and their mobilizing strategies will likely continue to flourish.

Read more in Edward T. Walker, *Grassroots for Hire: Public Affairs Consultants in American Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).