Professionalising Election Campaigns: The Emergence of Political Consulting

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Abstract: The 2014 and 2019 Indian national elections were referred to as "Whatsapp elections", with IT cells, bots, and political consultants strategically using data-mining tools to build resonant narratives and tell voters what they wanted to hear. By the time of 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. Indeed, in interpreting and reproducing the allegiances of both the candidate and of individual voters, consultants have the power to "create the very context in which they work" (Sheingate 2016). While ideally this form of strategic political intervention could do what consulting firms claim, which is to close the deep gap between citizens and their representatives, there is little research to suggest that the campaigns driven by political consultants have increased accountability or transparency. This article suggests that such developments are turning electoral politics into a data-driven, technologically oriented, thriving business with far-reaching implications.

A post-independence India strived to build a self-reliant economy, where economic development was largely driven by the state. The government's general suspicion of both foreign and private interests pervaded the internal advisory process for decades after independence. However, while lobbying as such is stigmatized, the lines between lobbying, advisory capacity, and advocacy are blurry. As such, chambers of commerce and domestic business groups that represent big business interests influenced major decisions within economic planning (Chibber 2003). Several state advisory groups were set up to oversee state planning and allocate budgets to further industrial development and social development. The global economic crisis, along with the tensions manifested through the Cold War in the 1980s, led to a shift in dominant paradigms of the state and the private sector (Sanyal 2007). In the 1980s, Kaviraj (1988) argued that a coalitional strategy between the bureaucratic-managerial-intellectual elite, landed elite, and monopoly bourgeoisie gave these groups dominance over state-directed processes of economic growth, and the "allocational necessities indicated by the bourgeois democratic political system" (Kaviraj 1988:1230). Chatterjee (2011) argues that since economic liberalization in 1991, this balance of power in India has shifted. The rise of influence of the corporate class in comparison to the landed elite, and the opening up of a range of sectors to foreign and private control has changed the nature of "monopoly" houses. In addition, the managerial elite, or the urban middle classes, have largely disavowed the state as a corrupt, politically opportunistic entity and shifted from

supporting state-driven developmental intervention to a consensus amongst on the priority of socio-economic growth through the professional, and corporate private sector[1].

A moment demonstrating this shift from central state planning to consultant-driven, think tank oriented governance is the disbanding of the Planning Commission in 2014 (Sajjanhar 2021, forthcoming). Soon after India's independence, the first Prime Minister set up a Planning Commission (PC) consisting of industrialists, technocrats, and economists to oversee state planning and industrial development. For the majority of the last seven decades, this elite body of intellectuals and technocrats has played a formative role in Indian policy making. When Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, his administration disbanded the PC and replaced it with the Niti Aayog, a self-described think tank-like organisation stripped of its budgetary powers and essentially made up of development and management consultants. Effectively, this shift showed the government transitioning its support from an already-watered down version of centralised planning by the intellectual elite, to a "diffuse entrepreneurship", handing power to those entrepreneurs and innovators who saw development as a market "opportunity" (Elyachar 2012; Irani 2019:10).

A technocratic discourse that argues that it is those outside the dregs of a corrupt politics and stagnant bureaucracy who know best is revived here, yet those considered the experts have changed. The outsiders who are hired to run the democratic process are increasingly the managers, engineers, and commerce, finance and business graduates: a particular kind of "professional". Technocratic professionals and management consultants often see their increased role as deepening democratic participation. Yet when political parties hire such professionals to target election campaigns, mine private data and potentially manipulate voters, how does this influence the production of political promises made to an electorate? When voters then elect representatives who hire external professionals to make policy, how does that affect diverse political participation? Such emerging forms of inward-ness can exacerbate elite confidentiality around vital decisions about politics and society which only deepen the long-existing chasm between governance and popular consciousness in India.

Professionalising Election Campaigns

The democratic process is, ideally, about more than just elections (Malleson 2018). 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. Studies in classical political theory (Hallas 1983; Springborg 1984), as well as Indian subaltern scholars (Chatterjee 2011)[2] argue that discourses of universal suffrage in liberal democracies often tend to falsely homogenise differential political power amongst citizens ("one person, one vote"). This, then,

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[1] See Sajjanhar 2021, for more detailed discussion on shifting government priorities towards technocratic expertise.

[2] Chatterjee's distinction between political society and civil society addresses the differential routes the modern-corporate class (civil society - through civic organisations, influence, and pressure) and working-informal class (political society - through electoral democratic means) must take to make demands from the state in post-colonial India.

conceals the voices silenced and the diverse forms of economic and structural violence experienced by marginalised groups in deeply unequal societies. Yet, those who are voted into power have a strong hand in shaping democratic processes. As such, the *profession* of hired firms to help with political persuasion predates even corporate advertising.

Political consulting can be traced in other parts of the world as far back as the 1930s. In the US, Baxter and Whitaker started *Campaigns Inc.*, spearheading the use of advertising techniques for political campaigning and pioneering new methods of persuasion through targeted messaging, pamphleting, and narrativizing (Sheingate 2016). They "forged a lucrative business *of* politics by discovering new ways to organise business *in* politics" (Sheingate 2016). Over the next several decades, Madison Avenue advertising professionals participated in a few presidential campaigns, yet it took until the 1980s for the term "political consultant" to be considered a full-fledged, profitable business (Johnson 2016). Much has been written on political consulting in the US (Cain 2011; Sheingate 2016; Johnson 2016; Medvic 2003), countries in Europe (Strömbäck 2009; Karlsen 2010) and recent democracies (Lisi 2013), yet their presence in a post-colonial, developing country like India is noteworthy. Whether Indian political parties campaign on the basis of ideologically coherent platforms or a coalition-centric struggle for power is a long-running debate (Chhibber and Verma 2018). Regardless, consultants' growing control over election campaigns and popular political visions widens the extant gap between elite leadership and popular consciousness.

Since 2014, the mechanisms of national election campaigns in India are being gradually handed over to political consultants: young graduates of the sciences, technology, engineering and management fields, who use data mining and strategic technological targeting to, effectively, tell voters what they want to hear. Foot soldiers, cadres, and on-the-ground party workers continue to do the work they do in a traditional party structure, but are increasingly being directed by young professionals working as political consultants who gain their legitimacy from top party leadership. Fundamentally, political consultants work with parties to win elections. Professionalising this process can refer to a number of activities, but particularly to the creation of a more "rational" (Negrine, Holtz-Bacha, and Papathanassopoulos 2007) and streamlined political organisational structure. This can mean better use of demographic data to help with targeting voters, skillful uses of forms of communication, and the reorganisation of political parties themselves. Crucially, however, the process of professionalising political parties and elections aims to enact a "rationalisation of persuasion" (Mayhew 1997).

Here, the rationalisation of persuasion refers to the process of producing a product (i.e campaign) that is better for consumption. In turn, if the product fails to "sell well", the lead actors (i.e the key politicians) or the program itself (the party's election promises) must be changed. While reports on the growing influence of political consulting in India argue that the tactics of persuasion have only been magnified, I suggest that these perceived changes are not neutral. Rather, they have been amplified beyond measure through the use of more specific, efficient and widespread databases and technological expertise. This amplification comes with new forms of identifying, targeting, and defining issues of political importance.

Indeed, in interpreting, recreating, and reproducing the allegiances of the candidate as well as individual voters, consultants have the power to "create the very context in which they work" (Sheingate 2016). An interview with a tech journalist revealed the growing reliance on data analytics in the election market:

> This is the moneyball moment of politics, especially data analytics. There was this time you could use statistics in baseball games to figure out statistics. This introduction of data into electoral strategies is something that professionals have the ability to do, which is not something you expect from a political party worker - you may have context, but not the ability to write computer programs and to mine data. One of the few things would be that you can create booth level, constituency level profiles, demographic profiles, figure out caste, positions - figure out what your chances are. You can channel your energy better if you have a micro-level understanding of a constituency, add it to a state, then add it to the national-level - whatever domain you're fighting your election in, you can accordingly think about messaging, issues, all that. It's good, especially if you're fighting a close election. Doing an election well is about margins - if there are two lakh people in a constituency and you can manage to shift twenty thousand people - it matters. It's huge. This whole idea of thinking very statistically about election strategy - I think that's a very distinct area where professionalisation matters. (Interview with a tech journalist, March 2019)

As the interview excerpt above explains, the key difference between a long-time party worker and a professional is that the professional consultant is able to build data sets, compile demographic data, and strategise political campaigns in a systematic way - one that works through rational calculation of the "odds" of winning. With India's first-past-the-post system, influencing ambivalent voters matters. But to what extent does campaigning change minds? Sachin Rao, the man in charge of training party workers within the Congress party, notes that elections are not won through the campaigns that take speed over the months leading up to the elections, but rather over the four years of the ruling party's performance. This analysis, while supported by studies on the minimal 'campaign-effect' of election outcomes (Kalla and Broockman 2018), fails to address how targeted narratives can capitalise on material realities, shaping how voters relate to their leaders and make sense of their circumstances (Bonikowski 2017). The degree of persuadability varies according to levels of "affective polarisation" that make citizens more or less susceptible to persistent framing devices (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). While campaign strategists cannot become king-makers, there are deep democratic implications of outsourcing elections to a mass of professional consultants.

The discourse of "fixing" a corrupt politics

In June 2019, I had a brief exchange with Prashant Kishor, the political consultant known to many as having "revolutionised election campaigning" in India. During this conversation, Kishor revealed that he sees professionals in democracy as able to combine "professional" processes (i.e 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, saying "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 (i.e Cambridge Analytica). The validity of this claim is debatable. The participation of professionals in democracy, as Kishor says, is understood to improve civic confidence and engagement in an otherwise defunct political system. Professionals who distance themselves from politics see themselves as post-ideological and able to "fix" the system, while remaining unencumbered by irrational partisanship. Because of the relatively recent development of these trends, it is difficult to claim tangible implications of these changes for democracy. However, through this paper, I try to demonstrate how this outsourcing and the production of "rationality" in politics and governance builds a professional industry that reproduces a singular (and often apolitical) conception of "common good". In the process, it obfuscates (and silences) the power struggles inherent to political plurality and procedural legitimacy (Bickerton and Accetti 2017). Here, this production of apolitical rationality is itself an ideological accomplishment.

As such, I suggest that the "ideologically agnostic" nature of political consultants' professional expertise powers a discourse that deepens the increasingly widening fissure between politics, representative governance, and political participation. While they see themselves in favour of a form of public good that is anti-political (where politics is a system that pursues instrumental and corrupt self-interest) (Ferguson 1994), I argue that their increasing involvement is diminishing democratic plurality. Indeed, in campaigning for what they call a "stable and good" governance structure, they tend to work for the political party with the greatest access to electoral funds which are the same parties aligned with significant corporate interests. The allusion to "stable and good", then, gestures to notions of public good emerging from stable economic markets. Political consultants come from the same pool as management consultants, of engineering and business schools, and similarly eschew ideological partisanship in favour of an agnostic notion of civic participation in democracy.

Scholarship on political persuasion in Indian elections highlights the clientelism evident in local and regional elections (Das and Maiorano 2019), the capturing of "vote banks" through strategic promises (Chauchard 2018), and handouts in interest-group politics (Elliott 2011). Political consulting firms see their work as bringing order to the corruption and "messiness" of Indian politics. While their involvement follows the logic of technocratic outsourcing, much of their tactics, technologies and processes are new. Older parties like the BJP often have a strong and geographically diverse structure of disciplined party workers. The BJP's foot soldiers, for example, include the seven-decade long paramilitary organisation, the RSS, that can access remote parts of the country to build loyalty and support for the party. Yet, political consultants target voters and constituencies in different ways: while they work closely with the political party to develop content that supports the party's messaging, they formulate new messages and election promises that will resonate with voters. In some cases, they use their demographic data to decide who should run from a constituency to maximise their chance of winning. As such, they play integral roles both in formulating political content and targeting it to maximum effect. While ideally, this form of strategic political intervention

could do what consulting firms claim, which is to close the deep gap between citizens and their representatives, few reports suggest that the research and strategising that go into the campaigns result in increased accountability or transparency. Instead, the use of data mining and analytics is being used to amplify two aspects of elections-as-showmanship: targeting and messaging. The distinction Kishor tries to draw in my brief conversation with him is useful: what is the line between stifling democracy (as he describes political consultants in the West) and deepening democracy (his hope for professionals participating in democracy in India)?

Prior to 2012, political parties had only occasionally hired external advertising agencies to create large-scale campaigns highlighting the party, instead of engaging with voters to target messages. In 1989, Prime Ministerial candidate Rajiv Gandhi hired Rediffusion, an Indian advertising agency, to run an unsuccessful campaign ("My Heart Beats for India") for the Congress party. In 2004, the BJP hired Grey Worldwide, an international advertising agency (who also worked with Samsung and Hyundai), to run their (also unsuccessful) "India Shining" campaign. The employment of professional data analysts and strategists in this process, however, has been a recent but quickly growing development with significant implications for electioneering. As such, these moments present both rupture and continuity – the amplification of elements that existed prior to these tools is, itself, a rupture. First, it both specifies voters of interest and targets messaging on a much larger scale. Second, it introduces an apolitical and "ideologically agnostic" approach to backroom political strategy that has, thus far, been driven by political partisanship, grassroots loyalty, clientelism, familiality, and/or ideological positioning. Indeed, it is the seeming political "neutrality" of these backroom consultants that gives them the credibility to work with several, competing political parties. They are perceived to work without self-interest and thus are considered trustworthy. Third, it brings technocratic professionalism into the electoral process to an unprecedented degree, turning election campaigns into an established and profitable market.

As more techniques become available in the areas of business and commerce, such as marketing strategy, news media management, and advertising, the professionalisation of commercial skills becomes more and more applicable to political communication (Negrine, Holtz-Bacha, and Papathanassopoulos 2007). As Mayhew (1997) notes, new discoveries in scientific methods can also lead to new campaigning techniques (i.e the use of polling was predicated on improvements in sampling methods). In India, approximately 64 percent of the population is reported to have mobile phones (Pew Research Center 2019), over 40 percent has an internet subscription and more data for cheaper rates (data costs have dropped by 95 percent since 2013 (McKinsey Global Institute 2019)), ensuring that a growing segment of Indians uses social media. A former consultant at IPAC and Jarvis Consulting (an offshoot of IPAC) explains the impact that new mediums of communication can have on political persuasion and election campaigning.

> As far as strategizing, it has given more avenues we can use. The way of communication has expanded since PM Modi's campaign in 2014. The usage of social media was there before that but people have started having separate social media cells, small parties have social media units, all candidates have their social

media teams. Because they know to spread the word amongst the youth which is more available online, it is really needed to connect with them through that medium. Social media has opened a lot of avenues but the core things are the same. Even today, the politicians we meet have the same things in mind, they want to connect with the people, want to tell them what's in the manifesto and what they have to offer. The only thing is with technical advances they can easily reach the masses and don't have to fly to their constituencies all the time to deliver the same messages. (Interview with former consultant at IPAC and Jarvis Consulting, June 2019)

While amplification allows messages to be targeted and delivered in more widespread ways, this former consultant gestures to another key dimension to this form of communication: it combines mass appeal with personal connection. Politicians and political parties can connect more directly with their constituents through Whatsapp groups and Facebook messages. They can send individually tailored messages to a person's phone, Whatsapp or Facebook account, accessing their psyche in a more private way. The crisis of Cambridge Analytica has revealed the risks of melding technological prowess and data mining with strategies of political persuasion. Facebook and WhatsApp in India have faced criticism for giving way to political parties' campaigning strategies, spreading misinformation and building highly targeted algorithms of knowledge dispersal. Indeed, the current public policy head at Facebook India was previously working for a BJP IT cell, formulating strategies to build support for the party. These networks run deep, turning the practical work of elections into a data-driven, technologically oriented, thriving business with far-reaching implications.

Firms and What They Do

Political consulting firms have been hired by political parties on a smaller scale, for individual politicians and state elections, over the last few decades - from image management companies, to boutique strategic consulting firms, to larger global firms such as Strategic Consulting Ltd. (which also owns Cambridge Analytica). The 2014 national election, however, introduced political consultants in Indian national politics. The Indian Political Action Committee (IPAC), founded by Prashant Kishor, is one of the key political consulting firms hired by parties fighting both national and state level elections. Along with IPAC, other significant firms include offshoots started by former IPAC employees, such as Jarvis Consulting and Association for a Billion Minds (ABM). The industry body Assocham measured 150 firms in 2014 that referred to themselves as political consultants. 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 has at least doubled. A typology of political consulting firms active in this growing professional arena varies according to their scale and association with specific political parties. As a journalist working on an investigative study of ABM explained, some are housed inside a political party, others are not loyal to a party but move between them ("the IPAC model, where you're not loyal to a particular party - now they're with Mamata Banerjee. They've done work with Congress, RJD, and Prashant Kishor rose with the BJP"), and the others work with individual politicians. While industry-wide data is difficult to access and has yet to be systematically measured, the scale of operations is multiplying: Political Edge, a boutique consulting firm,

has worked on average for 100 candidates a year since it started in 2011 (Sarkar 2019). WarRoom Strategies, a consulting firm founded in 2016, expanded from forty employees to seven hundred in two years.

IPAC's roots can be traced back to another organisation started by Prashant Kishor called the Citizens for Accountable Governance (CAG), which gained strength through working on Prime Minister Modi's 2014 election campaign. Initially a public health expert, he reportedly sees himself as ideologically agnostic (Thakur 2016) - not attached to a particular political credo, but rather to tangible and pragmatic policy solutions. The run-up to the 2014 national elections inspired many young professionals to place hope in a new government to challenge the reigning Congress party, and a desire to drive political change - yet crucially, not *through* politics. Instead, Kishor started CAG and hired young graduates from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and Indian Institute of Management (IIM) with the offer to direct change through their strategic, creative, and technological skills. Kishor and the CAG team managed Modi's political campaign - the first of its kind - introducing a candidate-focused mode of campaigning. As a key member of Modi's strategic team, Kishor planned several of his most spectacular campaign highlights, including the *chai pe charcha*, 3D rallies and a "unity run", while harnessing the role of social media armies to campaign for the BJP (Chaturvedi 2016). Before Modi's overwhelming win, Kishor was promised a key advisory role in infrastructure and development with the new government (Thakur 2016). However, according to a former CAG employee, he was reportedly dismissed by the BJP's leadership and not given the key policy role he was hoping for:

> At the time [Modi] was coming to power, he may have promised something [to Kishor], but was apparently taking a lot of time with it. And then Modi said okay, well, you said you're professionals - you can carry on with your work. Those were his exact words. He was like well, you're professionals, what - have you come with a new presentation? He actually said, *jab shaadi hoti hai, toh sab log aate hai, tent log aate hai, caterers aate hai* [when there's a wedding, all the workers come, the tent people, the caterers], and once the couple is married everyone goes back to their lives. So *shaadi khatam ho gayi* [the wedding is over], and you said you're professionals, so I guess you can go back to doing what you're doing. (Interview with former CAG employee, June 2019)

While this anecdote may make political consultants seem at the behest of political parties, it represents the opposite. This is a definitive moment: it reinforces the notion that political professionals gain their professional legitimacy by staying out of politics. Prashant Kishor's desire to be a part of the government is an outlier, as the majority of political consultants gain market credibility from being able to mould their campaigns according to different political parties' messages, whether these messages are straightforwardly "ideological" (as in the case of Hindu supremacy with the BJP) or opportunistic election promises that will most appeal to voters. The end of Modi's campaign led to the dissolution of CAG into two separate organisations: IPAC and the Citizen's Alliance. Since 2016, IPAC has paved the path for

several more influential political consulting firms, and expanded from 50-60 employees in 2016 to more than 600 in 2019.[3]

Political consultants tend to be engineering, science and management graduates from the country's top-most universities who enter the field for a variety of reasons - most significantly, because of their social networks. Graduates are recruited by alumni of their university who they implicitly trust. This work appeals to young professionals for one of two reasons: first, offering involvement in the election campaign to bring "change" and help bring about a vaguely "good, stable" government; and second, a fast-paced, exciting work environment promised to them by former students of their institution. These two motivations have one key attribute in common: they proclaim and reveal themselves as "post"-ideology, and use that as their strength. This is premised on the idea that the existing state and bureaucratic structure is stagnant and inefficient, and that politics, while deeply influential, is a corrupt farce. A current political consultant highlights this approach towards "ideological politics" in the excerpt below:

> I personally do not believe in the concept of ideology, I don't think any party, except maybe a hardcore Hindutva BJP...many Indian parties don't have a hardcore ideology. From election to election they're changing the ideas they're putting in front of the possible voter. I was not there when they worked with Modi in 2014, when people in CAG were working with RSS and BJP, I don't think their way of interacting with them was very different from working with JDU in Bihar, Congress in Uttar Pradesh, and Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. I don't think the way we operate depends on the ideology of the party. What matters to us is whether we're giving a stable and good government or not. Whether the party we're supporting, if it eventually ends up winning, is stable and a better one than the existing one. That's how we usually think about which projects to get. (Interview with current political consultant at IPAC, June 2019)

As this consultant notes, IPAC "cannot be stringent about choosing the ideologies they work with", and tends to believe that political parties make opportunistic election promises based on what research shows their constituency will respond to. The way "ideology" is referred to by this interviewee is not rigidly defined. Scholars of Indian politics have discussed whether "ideology" as a coherent system of beliefs plays a role in Indian politics (Chhibber and Verma 2018; Corbridge and Harriss 2013; Jaffrelot 1993), or that common conceptions of political ideology blame it for justifying criminality and self-interest (Bhatia 2019). Political power and defined party ideology in India do not necessarily coincide, particularly with the turn towards coalition politics in the 1990s. While this consultant notes that IPAC would like to work for a party that gives a "stable and good" government, consulting firms primarily tend to work for parties that are able to pay them their high fees. If a party wins, they often have no role to play in their policy making or decisions that might lead to what they perceive

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[3] In late 2018, Kishor left the core IPAC leadership and now calls himself a 'mentor' to the firm. He is rumoured to consult as an independent advisor to a number of political campaigns, most recently for Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal. In 2018, he told reporters that he is "done and dusted with being this freelance, in your words, ideology agnostic guy" (FE Bureau 2018) who does the "thankless job" of strategizing for other political leaders when "you don't have any control post a person's victory".

to be a "stable and good" government post-election. Here, good governance is understood as a politically-neutral sense of stability.

While firms such as IPAC offer this politically neutral campaigning as a form of political participation, Kishor offers another initiative to make politics professional, clean, and neutral. After joining active politics and relinquishing control of IPAC in late 2018, Prashant Kishor started an initiative called "Youth in Politics" (YIP) attempting to bring young people into active electoral politics: the slogan reads, "India is young but our politicians are old" (Kishor n.d.). This initiative sets up political consultants at IPAC as willing and able to provide mentorship to young, aspiring politicians. Young politicians are invited to learn from the "political acumen" of Prashant Kishor, and benefit from professional guidance and tailor-made mentorship plans from consultants at IPAC. As such, IPAC and Kishor have not only professionalised political campaigning, but are professionalising active politics itself. The former functions from a more explicit lack of political partisanship, while the latter offers itself as politically neutral while promising a platform to "meaningfully contribute" to electoral 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 about where these funds emerge from and which interests they support. This, then, primarily allows political parties that have amassed large amounts of funding and/or corporate support to take advantage of this professionalisation. 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.

> Most of them did tech education, went to banks, and they got to know of this opportunity...a lot of them are naturally inclined to try something new, and they're bright people. And Prashant [Kishor] doesn't care what background you're coming from as long as you're from a premier institute. And he lays a lot of stress on that - IIT, IIM. He would categorically ask what college are you from, or if you're from a good institute abroad, or if you've worked with Bain, McKinsey. The background matters to him and we get management fees based on the profile the team has. You have to share it, and it's easier telling the politician that okay, this is the kind of profile that my team has, these are the sort of people I have working. It makes you more credible. (Interview with former IPAC employee, July 2019)

The title of "professional", here, lends them credibility because of their elite qualifications and lack of perceived partisanship, but also makes them easily transferable for hire by different political parties.

In the 2019 national election, economic issues were framed discursively and messaged through a nationalist logic such that people believed Modi's larger interest lay in what is good for "the people" and for India's global glory. Despite record unemployment rates reported last year and 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, 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 Association of a Billion Minds - reaching out to constituents who have benefited or been offered key welfare schemes and targeting 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 Northeast.

Multiple interviews revealed how political consultants would do intensive focus group discussions in each constituency, station an informant in each booth for several months leading up to the campaign, assign individual people to target each double-sided page of the electoral roll, collect weekly reports, simultaneously prepare campaign jingles, posters, and slogans projecting the candidate as the answer to a multitude of different and sometimes contradictory desires. They accessed demographic data on caste and socioeconomic status available through land records, census lists, national surveys, electricity bills, and electoral rolls. This helped to target phone numbers through calls, Whatsapp messages and WhatsApp groups bringing together people of each caste, religion, and socioeconomic group. They would collect data through call center surveys, send recorded calls and gauge interest by tracking how long people would listen to each message. At the same time, the top leadership continued to reach out to party workers and supporters through a nation-wide proprietary NaMo phone app, while social media and traditional media worked to circulate a range of desires appealing to: material needs; symbolic needs (something to fight for i.e national security and nationhood); aspirations of moral and material desires; and 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:

> So you ascertain a certain fact from multiple places. We had a call center who we would give different surveys at different points in time to. It was concurrent all the time - where they would call people, ask a certain set of questions. We used to give IVR (Interactive Voice Response) calls. IVR is one sided information where you get a recorded call and it'll be like '*main Kejriwal bol raha hoon*' [this is Kejriwal speaking]. So with that data we would find out, say if its a farmer-specific IVR, we figure that the person who is listening to it till the end is probably a farmer. So we would track how many people answered their phones, how many people listened for how many minutes - we would have all that data. Then we'd ask them to give us feedback too, but this data would be passed on to our Whatsapp team, saying that these are the people interested, target them. They responded to the farmer campaign, here's the data, send the farmer information to them - saying this is our policy for

farmers, if we come into government then we'll do x for farmers. (Interview with former political consultant, August 2019)

As a former employee of IPAC shared with me, the communications strategy of campaigns would evolve based on sudden spontaneous developments. When Prashant Kishor's IPAC was building a campaign for Nitish Kumar's regional party, JDU, in the 2015 Bihar state elections, Modi made a disparaging comment about a personality trait being in the DNA of Bihar. This, then, became a core feature of a Bihar campaign that was in opposition to Modi's BJP.

> You can't pre-conceive campaigns - you don't know where it will go once you start. So Modi went to a rally and made that DNA comment - and he had made a very personal comment on Nitish Kumar, saying there was something wrong in his DNA. Prashant picked that up, was watching that rally in front of us and was like, replay it. We'll form a campaign on that - that you have said Bihar has something wrong in its DNA. So we ran a DNA campaign, it was a huge campaign, where people were giving their nails and hair and sending it to the Prime Minister's Office, and the BJP party office, saying you can do a DNA check where you can see if Bihar's DNA is intact. It was crazy - all of my colleagues were collecting nail samples. (Interview with former political consultant, August 2019)

It is worth remembering that this election strategy demonising Modi was formulated by the same core leadership that, prior to this, centered Modi as the bringer of progressive and necessary change in India's 2014 national election. This example highlights the consultants' spontaneous ability to creatively build resonant mass campaigns, yet also of their particular ideologically "agnostic" positioning. While the technical skills they bring to their firms are of data analysis, perhaps more significantly what they bring is a worldview shaped by an apolitical discourse of change. Indeed, this approach to civic participation takes on a new relevance as an endless drive for novelty has the potential to dissolve more coherent structures of pluralistic politics.

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 acultural, apolitical technocratic expertise. The influence of skyrocketing technocratic and political professionalisation 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 NGOs, 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 emphasized the shift in whose ideas are valued. Indeed, political consultants are being hired to direct party workers, while democratic participatory voices are replaced by the influence of think tanks and consulting firms. While the political consultants and policy consultants this chapter describes may see themselves as

being "outside of" politics and governance - and thus outside of hegemony - their work of "rational calculation" (Mitchell 2002) and, indeed, their perception of their work, is at the frontlines of transforming everyday practices of governance and political discourse.

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