

Political Scientists as Consultants and Advisors: Marco Cacciotto

*Marco Cacciotto is 47 years old and a political consultant since 1996, one of the first in Italy, giving strategic advice to parties, candidates, public administrations, interest groups and labor unions. He graduated in Political Sciences at the University of Milan, with a thesis on the presidential election campaigns in the United States. He wrote a handbook on political marketing in 2011 for the Il Mulino publishing company. He teaches "Political marketing and public affairs" in the post graduate program in "Public and corporate communication" of the University of Milan and he is a board member of the IAPC (International Association of Political Consultants) and the EAPC (European Association of Political Consultants). He is also a founder of **Public**, a network of professionals and firms specialized in public interest strategies, communication, and research.*

IPS: Can you briefly describe your typical tasks and working day? Are you happy in your current job?

There is not a typical day and no fixed hours. I spend a lot of time on the phone and in meetings. During campaigns I usually travel a lot because I advise more than one campaign at the same time (an average of four or five, my "record" is 12 campaigns being run simultaneously in 2014). I'm quite happy, but in the last two years I have worked less on electoral campaigns and moved toward grassroots campaigning and applying my experience to corporate needs.

Political consulting is a relatively new profession that evolves and redefines itself at every electoral cycle. The birth and definition of the modern political consultant are strictly linked to the transformations produced by radio, cinema, and particularly, television. Today, we are seeing yet a new transformation with the rising importance of the Internet and digital technologies, the wide use of political marketing (and analytic measuring systems), and with new and advanced techniques of segmentation and micro targeting of the constituency. There are several factors that represent significant challenges for the political consulting industry in the years to come, and which could bring the profession to be redefined, once again: momentous technological advances; the extending of campaigning in public affairs and policy consulting; more services and clients from the private industry as an extension of voter/consumer segmentation and innovative approaches developed for political campaigns; the increasing need for continuous campaigning (which usually results in either a long-term and stable work relationship with the elected candidate or a temporary "settling" in institutions until the next electoral campaign).

IPS: Is your job the result of a tenaciously pursued project, or rather of an opportunity you seized? Had you planned this type of career whilst you were studying because you were attracted by it, or rather is it the result of a later choice? Did studying Political Science matter?

Yes, it was my dream and my goal. I discovered the political consultant role while I was writing my thesis dissertation on “the role of the media in US presidential campaigns from 1952 to 1996.” I bet on a profession that was not present in Italy and a lot of people in the communication sector tried to discourage me, by saying that it was an American job and it would never work in Italy. I graduated in political sciences with the “political science” professor because there was not a political communication teaching block during those years. Now I teach “political marketing,” which has been defined as a marriage between marketing and political science. Political marketing is created by applying marketing concepts from business to politics, but not by simply imposing one over the other. I believe that studying political science is fundamental for everyone that is willing to become a political consultant.

IPS: People you work with often have a different educational background to you. What are the competing academic backgrounds in your working environment? Do you perceive you have an advantage or disadvantage vis-à-vis these colleagues? What does such advantage or disadvantage consist of?

Political campaigning is an art, but a scientific approach is needed. My advantage consists in being not just an expert in communications or marketing: I know political rules, and I know how the political system has developed and works. You cannot prepare an effective campaign if you do not know laws on political procedures that shape campaigns and the political market.

IPS: Is there anything not written in textbooks that you have learned thanks to your work experience, and that you would recommend should be taught to politics and policy students?

Political consultants measure public opinion, target and identify likely voters, craft messages and strategies, design television and print advertisements, build websites, and decide how to adapt the overall theme and strategy of the campaign for the digital media formats. Books are often theoretic and for scientific purposes divide in clear and subsequent stages the preparation and the running of a campaign. Reality is more chaotic and less predictable; it is possible to learn only through practice and experience to govern a dynamic environment.

IPS: How would you re-organize (if needed) courses in Political Science (including its sub-disciplines) in order to structure a curriculum that could naturally lead to your current job?

Politics have entered the “fast” era of communication, like companies did before: 24-hour news cycles; fast diffusion of messages; media used for engaging citizens, as well as sending messages; personalized communication; segmentation of voters by lifestyles with the use of databases and measuring systems that are ever more sophisticated. Data-driven politics is changing the way parties and candidates are campaigning, requiring new skills for political consultants. The Obama 2012 campaign recruited some of the best young minds in the booming fields of analytics and behavioral science and placed them in a room they called “the Cave” for up to 16

hours a day over the course of roughly 16 months. They developed a host of highly effective marketing techniques that were either entirely new or had never been tried on such a grand scale. Social strategists and data analytics experts become a fundamental part of campaigns that aimed to tailor message and activities to a particular person's interest through the use of digital information and computer algorithms. Political Sciences classes should reflect those changes, teaching, for instance, data analytics, but at the same time give an overall view on marketing, political institutions and the electoral system. Students should know how the parliament operates, how legislative procedures shape outcomes, and how entities like the executive, lobbyists, and organized citizens influence the work of the legislature. How can you be a strategist if you do not know the impact of a different electoral law on political supply, the limitations to campaigning that comes from laws on political communications?

IPS: Should political science scholars “get their hands dirty,” i.e., intervene more in politics and policy making, so that they gain in relevance? As far as your activity domain is concerned, is it possible to distinguish easily between technical knowledge on the one hand, and political values and policy preferences on the other?

Yes, I think that political scientists should be more involved. In 2012 Nate Silver set off a modest paradigm shift in political journalism and brought the rules of political science to Beltway journalism. His blog “FiveThirtyEight”—which was acquired by ESPN in 2013—quickly attracted imitators and competitors. Mr. Klein started *Vox*, the *New York Times* established a new quantitatively minded section, called “The Upshot,” and the *Washington Post* annexed a blog, called “The Monkey Cage,” dedicated to political science. What was once Mr. Silver's lonely crusade soon became an echo chamber. Although these sites occasionally conducted their own statistical studies, they mostly relied on existing academic work, giving political scientists an audience of unprecedented scale. The Monkey Cage blog on the Washington Post website has published more than 8000 articles, featuring nearly 1.500 political scientists. Academic engagement can shape the terms of public discourse, providing information, and analytical models.

IPS: For a political science scholar who wants to be active and produce an impact on policy making, is it easier to do it by studying the policy process or rather by being fully part of the process as decision maker?

It is better to do it by studying the political process, otherwise the risk is that you will become part of the game. A political scientist should be independent and not become a pundit. Once, at an international conference of political consultants, they asked me, “do you prefer be introduced as a professor or as a consultant?” I answered “You can say that I'm a consultant when I win elections and a professor when I lose.” They still remember the joke.

In Italy being a professor is often an advantage when you talk to a journalists or a potential client because you are perceived as more authoritative, but it can become a risk to be perceived as someone that is not practical, out of touch with reality. There is a gap that must be voided.

IPS: What is the added value of the political science scholar to the job of policy practitioner?

I think that political scientists should defend the need for a quality work. If I think of polling, I saw so many polls that were conducted in a bad way using small samples to draw conclusions and estimates electoral outcomes. Public polls are used as a political communication tool but the result is becoming the perception that all the polls are bad and not reliable. Now the trend is doing research online and using data from social networks but some outputs are really not scientific.

Political scientists should help political professionals that need accurate data if they want to prepare the best strategy to win. If you start a campaign with a wrong map your road to victory could be long or without an end.

Analytical tools and the measurement of every single aspect of a campaign is the latest trend coming from the USA: Jim Messina, Obama's former campaign manager that now is working also for Renzi, represents a new generation of consultants that are fond of metrics. Messina is convinced that modern presidential campaigns, unlike what is found in history books, are comparable to fast-growing technology companies, and the presidential job position is like that of the company executives. Big data allows campaign executives and strategists to measure and therefore manage campaigns more precisely than ever before.

Political scientists can help to measure the effectiveness of communication activities and help strategists and politicians to make decisions based on numbers and not only on intuition. Data-driven politics is changing the way parties and candidates are campaigning, requiring new skills for political consultants and represents a huge opportunity for political scientists.

IPS: And, vice versa, how is the profession of policy practitioner improving the academic work?

I started to work in 1996 and to teach at a university in 2005. My first approach with political communication models and studies of electoral campaigns has been not easy. Often I thought that academic models and a lot of assumptions were not correct because reality was quite different. I think that is very important that a scientific approach must be tested on the ground. When I developed the CDA approach to campaigns, my work started from my practical experience: I had the opportunity to test it on several campaigns and make it better year after year. In the last ten years a lot of things have changed and in my field political marketing studies and models have played an important role.