

While negative stereotypes about the role of the media in campaigns were generally confirmed by our interviews, stereotypes, or commonly held beliefs about the role of money and consultants in campaigns, were actually challenged by other insights the interviewed candidates offered.

**BY JANET GRENZKE & MARK WATTS**



Janet Grenzke, a Democratic strategist, is the founder of Abacus Associates, a Hatfield, Mass.-based international public opinion and strategic research firm.



Mark Watts is partner at Abacus Associates and has been involved in political polling for over a decade.

The survey this article is based on is part of The Campaign Assessment and Candidate Outreach Project sponsored by this magazine along with the Center for American Politics and Citizenship at the University of Maryland, funded through a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts.

# What Candidates Say About Campaigning

Challenging stereotypes about the people who run for public office in America

**M**ONEY, POLITICAL consultants and the media all play significant roles in the success or failure of an American political campaign. These three areas also can contribute to a public perception of political campaigns that is largely and stereotypically a negative one.

Our firm recently examined this troubling area of the American democratic system by conducting interviews with candidates who have run for public office in New England. As part of a larger survey research project sponsored by *Campaigns & Elections* magazine and the University of Maryland, we explored the extent to which the experiences of the candidates we interviewed challenge, reinforce or modify these stereotypes.

While negative stereotypes about the role of the media in campaigns were generally confirmed by our interviews, stereotypes – or commonly held beliefs about the role of money and consultants in campaigns – were actually challenged by other insights the interviewed candidates offered.

In general, our candidates' experiences and perceptions present a significantly more positive picture of modern campaigns and democracy than the stereotypes suggest.

Interestingly, the power of these stereotypes is so great that many candidates whose experiences were not remotely similar to the experiences defined by the stereotypes still firmly believe in the negative stereotype. Many believe that the campaigns of most other candidates can be presented in negative terms.

## Money Isn't Everything

*Money is very important, but not determinant.* All the candidates we interviewed agreed that it is essential to have enough money to deliver their message through paid advertising or mail. Not surprisingly, larger sums of money were more important to interviewees who ran in statewide and competitive federal elections than for interviewees in lower-level campaigns. On the other hand, candidates for higher office also had greater capacity to raise these larger sums of money.

Most felt that money was very important, but that spending the most money certainly did not guarantee victory. They felt they needed enough money (which varies according to the race) so that voters were familiar with their name and message. Then, other resources became more important. Both an unsuccessful candidate, who outspent his opponent, and another unsuccessful candidate with less money than his opponent thought that the influx of several \$100,000 more would not have changed the outcome of the race. Of course, being outspent by huge margins is an entirely different situation.

*“Money does count. Although money isn't everything, there are people with lots of money who are defeated in primaries and general elections. You need a presence in the district – grassroots organizing.”*

*–Successful candidate for state senate and Congress*

The commonly held belief that campaign contributions influence candidates'



positions on issues was not confirmed by the experiences of our interviewees. According to the stereotype, candidates are faced with two choices – neither of which is good for them or democracy. First, the need to raise money pressures elected officials into making policy decisions that they would not make otherwise. Or, if they refuse to change their position, they are denied the contributions and possibly the election. According to the stereotype, candidates either sell out or they do not get the money they need to win, which in the simplest terms implies that most candidates who win, sell out.

None of our interviewees, in races with costs ranging up to about \$6 million, felt it was necessary to change their behavior or positions in order to get money. Several interviewees grouped contributors into two categories: soul mates and those with a policy agenda. Candidates see no pressure whatsoever from their allies, or soul mates.

*“You are raising money from people who either you have some serious contact with, which is of a policy nature, or you have people who are soul mates. These folks [soul mates] expect nothing, never ask for anything whatsoever. They are just looking [out] for their government.”*

*—Successful candidate for state senate and Congress*

On the other hand, candidates are uncomfortable with their relationship with large contributors – not because they feel

they have to change their policy positions or votes – but because talking with these people takes them away from other, more desirable aspects of campaigning and cuts into family time. One candidate referred to the situation as an “unintentional increase

**MOST CANDIDATES FELT THAT MONEY WAS VERY IMPORTANT, BUT THAT SPENDING THE MOST MONEY CERTAINLY DID NOT GUARANTEE VICTORY. THEY FELT THEY NEEDED ENOUGH MONEY, WHICH VARIES ACCORDING TO THE RACE, SO THAT VOTERS WERE FAMILIAR WITH THEIR NAME AND MESSAGE.**

-----

in tension,” and others expressed the frustration of having to tolerate extended conversations with contributors when they were pressed for time and needed to make more fundraising calls.

One elected official who had held a variety of offices over the last 30 years explained that he was not pressured on leg-

islation relating to school funding, taxes, and labor issues because of his long public record on these issues. Typically, he said he sees more pressure on emerging issues where legislators have not solidified their positions. Also, he believed that younger elected officials might be somewhat more vulnerable.

Despite the fact that none of our interviewees could remember situations where the need for campaign contributions influenced their issue priorities or vote, many believed that *other* elected officials regularly succumbed to pressure from contributors. We were struck by how many of our interviewees shared the stereotypic view of their colleagues’ relationship with contributors – even though that relationship was foreign to anything they had experienced.

While we find no example among our candidates where they were directly influenced to support a policy position in exchange for a campaign contribution, this does not mean that the money had no influence on the process and policy outcomes. Simply, we find no evidence that the influence comes in the form of money for votes. However, as one candidate said, “I didn’t feel obligated to the individuals that gave me \$1,000, but if the phone rang and they were on the other end, I would absolutely pick it up.”

One independent candidate for governor said he relied primarily on a grassroots campaign to get 7 percent of the vote in a four-way race. Fundraising was almost nonexistent in his campaign. However, just as candidates can feel pressure from

contributors, candidates can also feel pressure to modify their position in order to win votes in a grassroots campaign. The following comments from a candidate interviewed emphasize how much he learned by talking with people with different opinions throughout the state, but he was equally firm about not being influenced by these conversations. Through dialogue, he could find areas of consensus at some level of generality. His conversations helped him shape policy around these areas of consensus and adopt language that communicates with others with policy differences.

*“I was kayaking the coast Down East. The coast is enshrouded with fog – out of the fog there is this lobster boat, and we paddled up to it. The guy is pulling his traps and has got a thick Down East accent and I said ‘Hello, I’m \_\_\_\_\_ running for Congress back in ...’ and the guy almost fell off his boat. We got chatting, and then he took me up to the local coffee hangout and 20 burly fishermen told me to sit down. So, I sat down and spent two to three hours chatting with them, listening and learning, and it was a very, very worthwhile experience, you know, because I was actually learning something and listening to these people and their concerns and what I realized was that they are as Green as the next as far as protecting the coast and protecting the fishery. You learn as you campaign... I can’t say that I changed any values or, articulated things differently, but I can say that I learned.”*

*—Unsuccessful gubernatorial and congressional candidate*

One might consider dialogue a continuum that ranges from learning from voters to learning from organized interests to outright quid-pro-quo relationships. Again, our interviewees learned, but none said they needed to engage in relationships that approached the quid-pro-quo end of the continuum.

The need to raise large sums of money did discourage a few of our interviewees from running for higher office, and it was irrelevant to the decision of others. In this sense, the stereotype is partially confirmed. More good fundraisers and fewer good public servants get elected these days. This is not to say that good fundraisers who get

elected are bad public servants. It is simply that being good at fundraising is part of what it means to be a good candidate.

None of our interviewees liked to raise money, but many also had reservations about aspects of public financing. Some thought the limits were unreasonably low, and therefore the public would become less informed and marginalized from the political process.

*“I think the state campaign finance reforms are terrible. [State] campaign finance reform in 1994 cut back the*

NONE OF OUR  
INTERVIEWEES LIKED TO  
RAISE MONEY, BUT MANY  
ALSO HAD RESERVATIONS  
ABOUT ASPECTS OF  
PUBLIC FINANCING. SOME  
THOUGHT THE LIMITS  
WERE UNREASONABLY  
LOW, AND THEREFORE  
THE PUBLIC WOULD  
BECOME LESS INFORMED  
AND MARGINALIZED FROM  
THE POLITICAL PROCESS.

---

*amount of money people could contribute, which leads to less participation, less effective campaigning because you don’t have enough money to really utilize a grassroots organization.... The clean election reform takes it even further in a negative direction because they do nothing about the price of campaigns.”*

*—Unsuccessful candidate for district attorney*

However, one candidate lost her first race (without public financing) and then won a subsequent election with public financing. She much prefers her relationship with lobbyists under public financing:

*“So now that I have been elected with this clean campaign process, those same*

*lobbyists, the same folks who would say, you know, I can’t give money... I pass them in the halls all the time. At first I wanted to be smug, you know, that you can’t carry that for very long anyway. But now, if I need a question answered because we don’t have a lot of staff, they resource people to me ...but I have no obligation to them. I can ask a question and get a piece of information and say, how’s the wife, how are the kids, and I don’t feel like I have to lean into anything that they’re saying and I can’t promise that that wouldn’t have happened to me with money in the picture.”*

*—Successful and unsuccessful candidate for state senate*

Likewise, this candidate, along with others, felt the qualifying limits in campaign finance laws were not sufficient to screen out frivolous candidates. One candidate thought they were sufficient to screen out candidates who do not have a strong network.

*“It was easy to qualify. I called 15 people and got \$100 from each of them. I threw the net out maybe to 100 people and made a few phone calls and I think I probably did it in a week. I can be an independent, get 150 signatures and be on the ballot and use the public money to spout my agenda, so that part worries me a little bit.”*

*—Successful and unsuccessful candidate for state senate*

### **Do Political Consultants Usually Do a Good Job?**

Abacus Associates was involved in the campaign of only one of the 10 interviewees. We deliberately chose candidates who were not our clients so that they could be as candid as possible in discussing their campaign and the role of consultants in their campaign. In contrast to the stereotype of consultants, our interviewees generally had very positive comments about their consultants.

*“[General and media consultant] did a good job. He shaped the message. He helped. He fought that insider game in a way that I had never had somebody do....”*

*—Successful candidate for AG; unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate*

*“Pollsters bring you accuracy. They bring you an accurate understanding of where you really are, and you know it’s always good to know the truth. You can accept the situation.... You have to understand the situation before you can deal with it, and I think that’s what pollsters do for you, and they are invaluable. My media consultant was extremely helpful to me in communicating what I wanted to communicate without my having to bore everybody to tears with long speeches.”*

—Unsuccessful candidate for district attorney

Only one of the 10 interviewees thought a consultant gave bad advice in order to make more money through an expensive media buy.

Typically candidates thought the financial conflict of interest was widespread, but it did not happen in their campaigns.

Many interviewees readily identified conflicts with consultants that occurred over which issues or background attributes should be featured in their message. Conflicts over strategy and pressure from consultants were much more troubling to them than any pressure they received from campaign contributors because they trusted and respected the expertise their consultants brought to the campaign. Interviewees could describe these disagreements in detail years after the election. Many are still ambivalent about what the best course of action would have been.

Some disagreements emerged because a candidate’s experience or persona within a previous office is not particularly relevant to the higher office they seek, and/or voters are interested in different issues from those the candidate has focused on in the past. Candidates generally like to talk about issues they have worked on in the past. Their expertise and comfort level with these issues is highest. If they are incumbents running for higher office, they have already successfully packaged themselves for the voters and the press. On the other hand, consultants are more likely to push a message that is a closer fit to the higher office and a closer fit to what voters care about in the current electoral cycle. There are often several ways to win an election, and sometimes there is no winning message. In these cases, the best strategy is far

from obvious.

Other candidates spoke of frustration because consultants pushed them into simplistic positions on issues, such as “zero tolerance,” “three strikes you’re out,” being against term limits and tax increases, and supporting a ban on partial-birth abortions. Candidates recognized that a media campaign requires some simplification and that they needed consultants to help them get that message across to the voters. However, they were frustrated when the message became too simple and somewhat untenable when given further thought. As one candidate put it:

OTHER CANDIDATES  
SPOKE OF FRUSTRATION  
BECAUSE CONSULTANTS  
PUSHED THEM INTO  
SIMPLISTIC POSITIONS ON  
ISSUES, SUCH AS “ZERO  
TOLERANCE,” “THREE  
STRIKES YOU’RE OUT,”  
BEING AGAINST TERM  
LIMITS AND TAX  
INCREASES, AND  
SUPPORTING A BAN  
ON PARTIAL-BIRTH  
ABORTIONS.

-----  
*“In a complicated world where people have been barraged with information from all over the place, a candidate who can’t define precisely what their image is, what their program is in a fairly simple way is just not going to get heard. You don’t penetrate. So it is an advantage to have these consultants make sure that your message doesn’t get lost in the blur.... It is also the bad news because ... some messages don’t lend themselves to simplification... so there is sort of a stupidification of the message that takes place at the same time.”*

—Successful candidate for AG

Sometimes disagreements emerged be-

cause the candidate felt the consultant did not spend enough time and effort to understand the candidate, his or her race and the district.

*“I wouldn’t hire \_\_\_\_\_’s group, you know, I’m still angry. His media campaign, \_\_\_\_\_ had \$2 million and it was completely wasted, a lot of money.... They had these terrible, deplorable ads just ripping the crap out of \_\_\_\_\_. They were so offensive, they turned people off. I think they were the classic sort of ads from inside the Beltway... I mean nobody from the firm was ever up here and they were completely cut off from the district.”*

—Successful candidate for state representative; unsuccessful candidate for lt. governor

When hiring consultants, our interviewees looked for similar qualities and, for the most part, their consultants had these qualities. They wanted consultants they could trust. They defined trust as caring about them as people, protecting them and being honest. They did not want to be used simply as another campaign to further a consultant’s career. They wanted consultants who were smart, would put in the time and hard work necessary to understand them and their races. Some also mentioned the importance of having a team with diverse opinions. Some wanted innovative consultants who were willing to take risks. Several valued a smaller firm with whom they could establish personal relationships. Several of these interviewees felt the large firms with Beltway reputations would not be accessible and would not take the time to understand them and their district. As one unsuccessful gubernatorial and congressional candidate put it, “They weren’t the type of people you could sit around the table with and necessarily just yuck it up and have a cup of coffee.”

## The Media Coverage Is Lousy

Almost all interviewees were frustrated by the role of the media in their campaigns for reasons that are consistent with those expressed by its vocal critics. Even those who thought they got reasonably positive coverage criticized the way the media covered the campaign. Most candidates, in fact, were quite negative about the press cover-

age of their campaigns. In their races, they said, the free press emphasized the negative aspects of candidates, fed on conflict and contributed to the public's disillusionment with candidates and politics.

*"The media look for controversy... If they can ever find a crack, someplace, into which the salt can be rubbed or whatever, that is what gets attention. If you can create a fight then maybe somebody is going to pay attention ... As an incumbent, I don't want to fight. I want to keep things on a relatively low key."*

—Successful candidate for state senate and Congress

One candidate cited the media's tendency to cover scandals, but felt he was reasonably successful in overcoming this bias by keeping the campaign issues nationally relevant.

*"As a general point I think the media is interested to some degree in candidates criticizing each other for one, and for two, the scandals. I think those are kind of on the rim above the meat-and-potatoes policy interests.... I think relevance to a larger cycle is something one should be able to figure out to some degree."*

—Unsuccessful congressional candidate

The free media insisted on covering the horse race, which made it difficult – if not impossible – for lesser-known candidates to gain credibility. Candidates felt they could not get the media to cover issues.

*"There's a big problem in American politics. The news media doesn't cover political politics with the intent to inform voters. It covers politics with the intent to promote the interests of the news organization. So there's a big emphasis on the horse race, who's going to win and who's going to lose, and there's a big emphasis on negative stories that might catch someone's eye and cause them to buy a paper, some of which is legitimate, and some of which is overhyped and there's almost no attention paid to educating voters about the candidates, their biographies and their substance or positions because they don't think that helps them sell papers. So campaigns play into this by basically doing very little to get*

*pinned down on an issue... The news media used to do a better job."*

—Unsuccessful candidate for district attorney

When issues were addressed, the media simplified positions and drew artificial contrasts. Candidates were pushed into litmus-test issues, which they felt misrepresented their position.

*"Newspapers, I think, are having a hard time. I just think it is all slapdash these days. It is all very quick, contentless stuff, which I really regret."*

—Successful candidate for state senate and Congress

One candidate, who had held elected of-

WHEN ISSUES WERE  
ADDRESSED, THE MEDIA  
SIMPLIFIED POSITIONS  
AND DREW ARTIFICIAL  
CONTRASTS. CANDIDATES  
WERE PUSHED INTO  
LITMUS-TEST ISSUES,  
WHICH THEY FELT  
MISREPRESENTED THEIR  
POSITION.

-----  
fice for the longest, noted that the push to simplify issues has changed the way voters talk with him.

*"You know, it's amazing to me; we knock on a lot of doors, I stand in front of supermarkets, I shake hands and so forth, and it's amazing to me how the voter has changed because you get questions like this: 'Are you pro-life, or are you pro-choice?'"*

—Successful candidate for state house and senate; unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate

But more than anything else in the campaign, most interviewees wanted an opportunity to present themselves to voters. Because the media did not present the complexity of their issues, their back-

ground and their personality to the public, interviewees felt they had to rely on paid advertising to communicate with voters. They believed in themselves and felt that they could make a more convincing case to voters than media consultants and the 30-second spot.

Finally, most candidates were deeply concerned about the high level of cynicism and lack of voter participation, which they attributed largely to the continual media barrage of negative information about candidates and campaigns.

*"If you are a young person and for 30 years listened to people denigrating government, denigrating each other, negative advertising...and then you have heard Common Cause for 30 years telling you that the government is corrupt. It is a perfectly rational decision not to be involved in politics, never to run for office, never work in the public sector. That is different from my world growing up where... I stood with John Kennedy as a hero, Martin Luther King ..."*

—Successful candidate for AG; unsuccessful candidate for governor ■

SURVEY METHODOLOGY:

We conducted 10 in-depth interviews (nine personal interviews and one telephone interview) of more than one hour in length with candidates who have run for public office in New England. The candidates bring a wide range of electoral experience to the project.

Every state in New England is represented except Vermont. All of our interviewees have faced at least one competitive election in the last four years. Some have been candidates in many elections, some only in one. Some candidates have never won a race; some have never lost a race. Five candidates have experienced both losing and winning competitive campaigns.

We interviewed candidates who have run as challengers, incumbents or both. Collectively, the candidates we interviewed have campaigned for the offices of state representative (3), state senate (5), United States House of Representatives (2), county district attorney (2), attorney general (2), lieutenant governor (1), and governor (4).

Two candidates ran both with and without public financing.

—Janet Grenzke and Mark Watts

For a Complete Listing of  
Political Consultants,  
See THE POLITICAL PAGES  
Online at:

.....  
[www.campaignline.com](http://www.campaignline.com)