

## **Title: Fractures in the Boiler Room: Tensions among Experts in Political Campaigns**

### **Abstract:**

In a post-*Citizens United v. FEC* electoral landscape, political campaigns have become a multi-billion-dollar industry increasingly structured by an array of professional consultants, donors, and corporations that shape the democratic process (Gold and Mische 2024; Kreiss 2016; Laurison 2022; Lee, McNulty, and Shaffer 2014; Walker 2014; Walker, McQuarrie, and Lee 2015). Recent work by Mudge (2018, 2022) has emphasized parties' "cultural infrastructure," or their ability to influence socialization and knowledge production. However, less is known about the construction of expertise and knowledge within parties and electoral politics at large. Today's political campaigns feature a combination of political operatives who move from campaign to campaign, with the construction of knowledge tightly held among key insiders who control campaign strategy and dependence on local supporters to gain momentum and carry out campaigning in the field through fundraising, door-knocking, and phone banking. Drawing on nine months of ethnographic observation and over thirty in-depth interviews, I argue that friction exists between professionalized experts/campaign operatives, concentrated in norms often produced in the Beltway, and local experts rooted in local forms of political knowledge from past campaign cycles, everyday interactions, and local history. I theorize three camps of knowledge actors: national producers grounded in expertise and technical knowledge shaped by national party organizations and adjacent groups in the beltway, local producers that belong to the electorate's epistemic community, and hybrid producers that seek to use data and technical knowledge from national organizations and combine it with an appreciation of local expertise.