CHAPTER 1

Personalized Political Communication in American Campaigns

EPISODE 1.1
Charlene is in her late thirties, African American, and looking for a job. Her home is in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a decaying, de-industrialized city with an unemployment rate over 10 percent and about 20 percent of the population living below the poverty line. Right now she is making ten dollars an hour canvassing for the Connecticut Democrats’ coordinated campaign—and gets a gas card every week too. “It helps pay the bills,” she says. She finished her Microsoft Office User Specialist class at Workforce, Inc., this afternoon, and since then we have been out walking door-to-door, talking to voters.

Charlene knocks on the door, holding her clipboard with the Jim Himes for Congress flyers and a map of the area in one hand and a PalmPilot with our script, walk sheet, and talking points in her other hand. I stand a couple of yards behind her, clutching my own clipboard and PDA (personal digital assistant), watching the house for any signs of life. We are about to leave when an elderly white woman opens the door. We know from our list that she is probably Anna Rizzo, a seventy-seven-year-old registered Democrat who lives here. She is our target because she is an infrequent voter. Ms. Rizzo leaves the door chain on, and asks, “What do you want?” Charlene says, “We’re here to tell you about Jim Himes, the Democratic congregational candidate.” I flinch as she says “congregational.” She has done it before, just as she again ignored the script we have been instructed to use. Ms. Rizzo closes the door without a word. We write her down as “Not Home.” She will be contacted again soon because she has been identified as a part of one of the target universes—sometimes called “lazy Democrats”—and because the campaign has her phone number and address.

“This is a bad list,” Charlene says to me as we walk toward our next target, a couple of houses down the street. “I can’t believe they’ve sent us out here. What a waste of time. Well, well—that’s their problem.”

EPISODE 1.2
It is late afternoon in Fanwood, New Jersey, Linda Stender’s hometown, a town she has served as mayor and state assemblywoman for years and now hopes to represent in Congress. Her campaign office is in a worn-down demolition-slated building just across from the train station. Today we are four people
working the phones, calling voters to tell them about Stender and ask them a few questions about where they stand on the upcoming election. Everyone on the phones is a volunteer. All are well over sixty (except me). We sit in a room separate from where the staff works.

Paula gets what she calls “a live one,” her first since she arrived twenty minutes ago. So far she has just been leaving messages. She reads the first lines of her script to the voter, asking who he plans to vote for in the fall. It turns out he is leaning toward Stender’s opponent, state senator Leonard Lance. Paula immediately gets into an argument with him. “I can’t believe you want to vote for a Republican after what Bush has done to our country! Dragged us into a criminal war for oil, undermined the Constitution, handed over billions in tax cuts to the wealthiest!” They talk for a few minutes. From what we can hear, it is a spirited discussion.

After she puts down the phone, Paula says to the rest of us, “I can’t believe there are people out there who aren’t Democrats.” We all chuckle. Clearly, Stender’s campaign staffers and her outside consultants have an inkling that there are some voters in the district who aren’t Democrats. Stender ran as a progressive in 2006 and lost narrowly to the incumbent Republican, Mike Ferguson. This cycle she is running as a moderate for what is now an open seat, without using her party affiliation or the name of the Democratic presidential nominee in her literature and advertisements. But many of the volunteers still see her—and present her to voters—as the woman they support, “the old Linda.”

**Episode 1.3**

Election Day is only a week away, and the field organizers are struggling to whip the GOTV (Get Out the Vote) program into shape. People are on the phones constantly, calling paid part-time canvassers and potential volunteers, trying to get them to confirm their availability over the weekend. There are thousands of shifts to be filled, walk packets to be assembled, call sheets to be printed. This is a major logistical operation, with many moving parts, pursued under intense time pressure.

One of the field organizers complains that his volunteers are “flaky” and won’t commit. The field director is stressed out: “We need more bodies!” He makes a call and then shouts to one of his deputies—who is technically employed by the state party and not the candidate—“We’ve got twenty more labor guys coming in. I need you to cut more turf. I’ll send you the lists.” Jack, the volunteer coordinator, is calmer, almost serene. He leans back and comments on the commotion around us: “We’ll have to close some locations; it’ll never work with all those phone banks. Multiple locations: great in theory, bad in practice. But they won’t listen. We don’t have time for this.”

Around 100 million Americans were contacted at the door or over the phone by various political organizations during the 2008 elections.
Millions of volunteers and tens of thousands of paid part-time workers did the contacting. Thousands of full-time staffers organized their efforts. At the surface it looked like nothing new under the sun. Even if the number of contacts made varies over time (and it has increased dramatically from 2000 onward), canvassing voters, by foot or by phone, is a staple of American politics. In some ways the conversations among people in 2008 probably were not all that different from those of 1988 or 1968: “Who do you plan to vote for?” “Here is why you should support my guy.” “Now, remember to go and vote.” That is the basic blueprint as campaigns try to identify where people stand, sway the undecided, and bring out their supporters. Volunteers who cut their teeth on Michael Dukakis’s or even Hubert Humphrey’s campaign for the presidency can still use their experience at the door many years later when confronted with an uninterested, unfriendly, or otherwise unapproachable voter who does not care much for “that one,” the man who later became President Obama. At the face of things, on the front stage, canvassing seems largely unchanged.

But behind the scenes hundreds of specialists toiled at their computers to make it all possible, to maximize the instrumental impact, and to try to keep it all under control. Away from the doors and off the phones, staffers, volunteers, and part-timers used new information and communication technologies ranging from by now mundane things like cell phones and email, to emerging tools like social networking sites, and to specialized technologies like tailor-made campaign Web pages and dedicated software solutions for targeting and management. In Washington, D.C., and in innumerable offices and coffee shops around the country, consultants crunched numbers to make sure their client campaigns made the most of it all. The work done to sort index cards with voter information and to physically cut and paste the walk sheets for a canvass in 1968 or 1988 had little to do with what it took to update detailed Web-accessible voter files, synchronize personal digital assistants, and print turf maps in 2008. In political campaigns new technologies have not replaced older forms of communication as much as they have revived them.

The backstage changes are not only technological, they are also institutional. When Barack Obama topped the ticket in 2008, many of the organizations that had provided much of the manpower to knock on doors for Dukakis and Humphrey—most importantly labor unions and local Democratic Party organizations—were no longer what they used to be. Candidates and their staffers today have to piece together their own campaign operations from a wider, less structured, and more unruly universe of allies, volunteers, and paid part-timers. The supposedly old-fashioned practice of contacting voters directly on behalf of a candidate or party is deeply intertwined with the most recent advances in online-integrated
software and database management; it is also deeply influenced by contemporary changes in how the major parties and their closest allies organize and are organized. Like campaign practices in general, these various forms of voter contact are characterized by both change and continuity.

This book deals with how American political campaigns pursue what I call “personalized political communication”—premeditated practices that use people as media for political communication. The main forms of this method of communication are door-to-door canvassing and phone banking, central parts of what political operatives call the “ground war.” I analyze this subject not to assess its impact on electoral behavior, but to identify the implications that ground war practices have for how we understand processes of political communication, for how we understand campaigns, and for how we understand what it means to take part in them—an important form of political participation, a part of what it means to have a government that is created at least partially “by the people.” How campaigns are waged matters, not only for electoral outcomes but also for what democratic politics is.

Personalized political communication on the large scale we have seen in recent elections requires resources that are well beyond those commanded by campaign organizations built around individual candidates. I show how this type of communication is pursued instead by wider “campaign assemblages” that include not only staffers and consultants but also allied interest groups and civic associations, numerous individual volunteers and paid part-timers, and a party-provided technical infrastructure for targeting voters. Close scrutiny of how such campaign assemblages engage in personalized political communication leads me to challenge the dominant view of political communication in contemporary America—that it is a tightly scripted, controlled, and professionalized set of practices that primarily represses turnout and turns people off politics in its cut-throat pursuit of victory. I highlight how even as they bankroll negative advertisements, feed the horserace coverage, and resort to direct mail attacks, campaigns also work hard to get out (especially partisan) voters and get people involved in (instrumental) forms of political participation. Analysis of how campaign assemblages wage ground wars leads me to dispute the widespread idea that American politics is increasingly the province of a small coterie of professionals as well as the romantic notion that canvassing and the like represents some purer form of “grassroots politics.” I demonstrate how even well-funded competitive campaigns for federal office continue to rely on a wide range of nonprofessional elements, how the campaign organizations themselves are at most unevenly professionalized, and also how even the most seemingly innocent volunteer canvass is tied in with specialized targeting technologies and staff expertise.
Finally, attention to campaigns’ and staffers’ instrumental need for people to engage in the labor-intensive work of personalized political communication, of contacting voters one at a time, at the door or over the phone, leads me to suggest that when elections are competitive and ambition is thus still made to counteract ambition, today’s political operatives and political organizations have a renewed self-interest in getting people to participate in the political process as volunteers and voters. Ground war campaigns are highly instrumental in their orientation; they pick and choose who they talk to and try to turn out, discriminate consciously and unconsciously in who they mobilize as volunteers, and have not even a semblance of internal democracy. But they actively encourage participation and generate higher turnout, and that is a good thing for a democracy plagued by widespread indifference and a sense of disconnect between people and politics.

Ground war campaigns and practices of personalized political communication offer a privileged point for observing American democracy in action. Working for a candidate or a party at election time is a paradigmatic form of political participation, something millions of people do every year. Most of them, whether they are volunteers or part-timers, will be asked to knock on doors or make calls and talk to voters. Canvassing and phone banking are intensely social, organized, and outward-oriented activities; they cannot easily be done in isolation from the privacy of one’s living room like making an online donation to a candidate or writing out a check to be mailed to a campaign committee. Personal contacts confront participants with parts of the electorate, bring them together with others who are involved, and introduce them to the organizational and technological intricacies of contemporary campaigns. They offer an opportunity to try to influence (however slightly) electoral outcomes; meet people with a passion for, or a professional commitment to, politics; and, as one volunteer put it, “take a real-life lesson in practical politics.” To understand practices of personalized political communication is therefore to understand a crucial component in civic and political life.

My analysis of recent ground wars is based primarily on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork on the Democratic side in two competitive congressional districts during the 2008 elections: Connecticut’s 4th district and New Jersey’s 7th district. The episodes I recount throughout this book, and all quotations without any other reference, come from the hundreds of hours I spent as a participant-observer in these two districts. Other than the names of candidates, all other names are pseudonyms, and a few scenes and locations are obscured further to protect the anonymity of the people involved, but all events are described as I witnessed them. Close examination of this unique firsthand evidence provides new insights into political communication and into how political
organizations operate today. It sheds light on the practices of political participation that these organizations constitute and make possible. The data I have is not always representative and rarely complete, but it provides for a close-up portrait of American electoral politics as it is practiced on the ground.

**POLITICAL PRACTICE ON THE GROUND**

Personalized political communication represents only one arm in the arsenal employed by contemporary campaigns. The ground war is fought under the cover of an “air war” waged by thirty-second television spots and spin. Canvassing and phone banking have something in common with these other forms of political communication that campaigns engage in, including “paid media” (advertisements), “earned media” (public relations), direct mail, and digital marketing—most notably their instrumental intent and their organizational origin. But they also have logics of their own. I focus on these distinct logics here because they are important, and because they have received little attention. A rich literature deals with the impact and implications of television advertisements, news coverage, and other forms of mass-mediated political communication, but few people outside the campaign world itself know much about how ground wars are fought. This book is thus not focused on the twists and turns of the two campaigns I followed. It does not purport to address their outcomes. It is not about why Jim Himes won in Connecticut or why Linda Stender lost in New Jersey. Instead, I deal with how it became possible for their two campaigns, initially made up of just the candidate and a handful of staffers, to pursue personalized political communication on a large scale and ultimately reach about 20 percent of the electorate in each district in person, by knocking on tens of thousands of doors and making hundreds of thousands of phone calls.

If one considers the rough average of three contacts per hour that campaign staffs expect from both those canvassing door-to-door and those on the phones, it becomes clear that personalized political communication on such a scale is an enormous logistical challenge. Contacting approximately 100 million people across the nation, as the numerous campaign assemblages that faced off at various levels during the 2008 elections did, takes about 33 million hours of work—and on top of that comes the effort that goes into gathering the people to do it, coordinating their work, and choosing which voters to talk to. Whereas the mass-media- and direct-mail-dominated politics of the last decades of the twentieth century sometimes resembled what Robert M. Entman has called a “democracy without citizens,” run by a small number of
consultants and funded by big-dollar donors, the resurgent interest in personalized political communication means that parties and campaigns today need people—lots of people—to wage ground wars.1

The average congressional district has a population of about 700,000 and between 300,000 and 400,000 registered voters. With high turnout expected in a presidential election year, a competitive race at hand, ample financial resources, and a strategic decision from the outset to try to call and canvass every potentially Democratic voter at least once, the staffers working on the two campaigns I followed aimed at contacting more than 100,000 people at home. Assisted by hundreds of volunteers and part-timers, as well as additional people mobilized by their allies in the labor movement and elsewhere, these campaigns got through to an estimated 20 percent of the electorate at least once, generating about 100,000 door knocks and around a 150,000 phone calls between Labor Day and the end of October, and at least another 100,000 knocks and calls over the “GOTV weekend,” the get-out-the-vote effort during the last four days leading up to the election.2 In the two campaigns I studied, paid part-time workers did most of the canvassing, volunteers did most of the phone banking, and allied organizations ranging from labor unions to progressive activist groups provided some help for each of these activities, along with additional “bodies” for the final push to get out the vote. (Campaign staffers made thousands of contacts themselves but spent most of their time organizing the overall effort.)

Every single one of the countless knocks and calls made served one or more of the same three instrumental purposes: to persuade swing voters (those who have no fixed political allegiances and whose votes can thus determine election results), to motivate base voters to turn out, and to gather more information about the electorate for further contacts. Every call or knock was predicated upon the participation of players well beyond the core of full-time staffers in the campaign organization itself. Every one of these contacts entailed potentially fraught encounters with voters, came with numerous organizing challenges, and had to be effectively targeted to be worth the effort.

To demonstrate what such ambitious ground war campaigns mean for political communication and for how we understand contemporary forms of political organization and political participation in America, the rest of this book deals not only with the act of contacting voters but also with the organizing and targeting that make these countless conversations possible. Together, processes of contacting, organizing, and targeting define how personalized political communication works. The episodes scattered throughout the text include some of the elements that must be considered in this type of communication—the different communities of staffers, volunteers, and part-timers involved; the various
technologies they use; the data their work is based on; the different motivations and conceptions of politics at play; and the whole heterogeneous edifice that is constructed around candidates in competitive districts to conduct field operations, to wage ground wars, to pursue personalized political communication.

Political practice on the ground does not single-handedly decide elections or define levels of political participation. Political scientists have long demonstrated the importance of broad economic trends, demographic developments, and party identification for electoral outcomes. Sociologists have established the importance of socioeconomic status and social ties for civic engagement. But campaigns matter—at the margin for who wins and who loses, and in terms of political participation because they constitute one of the pathways by which people can get involved in politics. The central role played by formal and informal intermediaries in encouraging, shaping, and sustaining civic engagement has led to detailed studies of, for example, antiabortion activism, environmentalist groups, and movements for urban renewal, but, curiously, not of political parties and campaigns.

Close attention to the work that goes into fighting ground wars brings to light an everyday life in campaigns that is far from the glamour that some associate with politics. Personalized political communication is rarely covered by journalists, who are more interested in who said what to whom and who is ahead. It plays no part in television drama series like _The West Wing_ (1999–2006; much loved by many campaign staffers). It receives little breathless commentary on cable channels or political blogs. Field operations belong to the electoral backstage, where people who are not candidates, policy specialists, or high-profile consultants work hard in relative obscurity to bring about these countless contacts. To make visible the daily practices that make personalized political communication possible on a large scale, this book focuses on what I actually saw people say and do on the ground in the campaigns, and not on how canvassing and phone banking are depicted in the press or by prominent political operatives marketing themselves and their work. It is only on the basis of such firsthand evidence that a clear analysis of the logics at play, and the implications they have, becomes possible.

**PERSONALIZED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

As mentioned above, I use the category “personalized political communication” to refer to practices of political communication that use people as media. In the United States, campaign staffers refer to these type of communication interchangeably as the “ground war,” the “ground game,” or
as “field operations,” whereas volunteers often call them “grassroots” activities, part-timers talk about them as “work,” and voters may simply think of them as a nuisance. The most common forms are door-to-door canvassing and phone banking, the practices in which most people who staff, volunteer in, or work part-time for American campaigns are engaged. Typically more than half of a campaign’s full-time staff is assigned to the ground war effort (and more than that in large campaign organizations). All volunteers are asked to help with it. Paid part-timers are hired to work on it.

While most of what I analyze here as personalized political communication is synonymous with what the staffers call “field,” the analytical category introduced serves to highlight the distinct character of these practices as forms of political communication. It also reminds us that comparable kinds of personalized political communication operate in different ways in different settings, whether animated by an archetypical political machine à la 1930s Chicago, new forms of privatized political patronage as in parts of contemporary New York City, or a rapid churn of college students working for profit-oriented companies offering plug-and-play canvassing operations to parties and interest groups that are willing to pay the price. These different entities all communicate with large numbers of target voters one-on-one, but they also represent different kinds of political organizing and constitute different forms of political participation.

Personalized political communication is personalized insofar as people serve as media for a message that originates elsewhere. It is thus distinct from mass-mediated and computer-mediated communications, the usual focuses of political communications research, just as it is distinct from direct mail and “robocalls” (instances of what have been called “medio” communication). In the case of earned and paid media, technological objects serve as channels between senders and receivers, while in the case of canvassing, human subjects are the intermediaries between political organizations and voters. This type of communication is political in the most ecumenical sense of the word. The people engaged in it perceive it to be political; the organizations involved are generally perceived to be political; and most of what is disseminated has direct bearing on electoral outcomes, the authoritative distribution of values, and the constitution of society. It is communication in the basic sense of a process for sharing symbols in time and space (symbols that go well beyond the semantic content of the words involved, including enthusiasm, attitude, and, in particular at the door, the embodied symbolism of class, gender, and race). For those who are disinclined to think of people as media, with all the instrumental overtones this concept has, think “messenger” and what that means. The communications scholar Klaus Bruhn Jensen provides a
threefold definition of media as the *materials* that function as a delivery system between a sender and a receiver, the *modalities* afforded (text, sound, visuals, etc.), and the *institution* (or organization or other entity) that makes mediation possible. When people function as media, we simply have subjects playing (at least part of) the material role we are accustomed to thinking of objects as playing. Communication through people is not necessarily face-to-face or unscripted. It can be conducted over the phone. It can be more or less affable or uncomfortable in form, more or less personal or impersonal in its content. What differentiates it from mass communication and medio communication is the element of live interaction, either in the flesh or mediated, live interaction that routinely takes callers and canvassers off message, interactions that most of those involved frequently find rather stressful. Personalized political communication involves interpersonal communication between the caller or canvasser and the voter contacted. But this does not make it a “direct” form of communication, since the entire interaction is orchestrated and brought about by a larger campaign assemblage working on behalf of a candidate who is not there at the door or on the line. (Speeches at rallies and candidate-voter interactions like those Richard Fenno has studied are arguably the closest we can come to political communication without mediation.)

The category of personalized political communication highlights a whole range of practices that most research on political communication has largely ignored. The emphasis has been on advertisements and news coverage. Both communications researchers and political scientists have concentrated on communication through technological media and their institutionalization in particular, and not on processes of communication more generally. Attention has been directed toward traditional mass media such as television, radio, and newspapers as well as today’s increasingly digital networked technologies. In this manner the study of political communication resembles the wider discipline of communications, with its inherited focus on mass media output and institutions. The most important exceptions to the focus on technological media have been a series of studies of the role of “social communication” in politics—analysis of how people talk about politics among themselves, unprompted by political organizations. These studies of various forms of “water cooler” and primary group conversations have supplemented the field of political communication just as the study of interpersonal communication has supplemented mass communications research. But the practical division of labor between the study of technologically mediated communication, on the one hand, and unprompted social or interpersonal communication, on the other, leaves out the entire terrain that the category of personalized political communication highlights: the premeditated and
often large-scale use of people as media, animated by larger assemblages. We see this not only in political campaigns but also in different ways in social movements, civic associations, religious proselytizing, and in direct marketing efforts, all trying to reach audiences through personalized communication. In all of these instances, people serve as media for messages that originate elsewhere and engage in practices that need to be understood in terms of both their impact on the target audience and their implications for the people and organizations involved.

Despite the fact that the American National Election Studies survey series clearly documents that tens of millions of people have been contacted in person or by phone every cycle in the post–World War II period and the fact that hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on generating all of these contacts in recent elections, the ground war has generally remained, in the words of two political scientists, “in the shadows” in conversations about electioneering and campaign communications. Figure 1.1 shows the percentage of people who have reported that they were contacted in person by the major parties in each presidential election year since 1956. (On top of this come additional contacts made by interest groups and others.) The postwar figure is typically around 25 percent, with occasional dips to 20 percent in the 1950s and 1990s and an extraordinary climb to over 40 percent since 2000. These millions of contacts have provoked relatively little interest among political scientists. Some have analyzed campaign organizations and the interplay between various allied groups at the state and local level, and some touch on field in more wide-ranging treatments of campaigns and elections. But only a few have focused directly on the use of people as media for political communication.

The most important recent research focused on the impact of ground war efforts is arguably the series of randomized natural experiments initiated in the late 1990s by Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber and their various collaborators. The growing literature inspired by their work seeks to identify the immediate and direct effect of voter contacts on people’s electoral behavior through rigorous research designs complete with control groups. It generally shows that personalized political communication is more effective than advertisements, direct mail, emails, and robocalls in getting people out to vote, and it can also influence who they vote for. The impact seems to differ to a considerable degree based on the kind of contact made (knocks are generally more effective than calls, live interactions vastly more so than any alternative). Free-flowing conversations, for example, seem to be more effective than more tightly scripted ones, and contacts from people who are somewhat familiar to the voter seem more effective than contacts from total strangers.

Overall, the experimental literature has consistently demonstrated that personalized political communication has considerable and measurable
immediate short-term effects on people’s voting behavior. These findings are entirely in line with what previous generations of social scientists have found. They have been not only noticed by political operatives but also anticipated, replicated, and expanded by internal studies conducted by the AFL-CIO, the Republican National Committee, and others. Such research affirms that field efforts aimed at swing voters sometimes sway them and that get-out-the-vote programs using people as media actually do get out the vote. And yet, although all of these studies recognize, at least in passing, what a challenge it is to orchestrate large-scale ground war campaigns, few study how they are conducted. To put it bluntly, we know that personalized political communication happens and that it works, but we do not know how it works and what that means. That is the question I pursue in this book.

GROUND WARS AS PERSONALIZED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In a sense it is surprising that campaigns still bother with canvassing and phone banking. Living in what some think of as a “communicative cornucopia” and faced with increasingly ubiquitous computing, multimedia convergence, nonstop cable news and blogging, and the proliferation of mobile devices that are supposed to make it all available to us “anytime,
anywhere,” it seems almost impossibly quaint that someone would knock on your door to talk to you about an upcoming election. The idea of a thorough “mediatization” of politics, the dominance of “media logics,” is central to today’s discussions of political communication in the postindustrial world. Though the evidence suggests a recent increase in the number of people who are contacted in person by political parties and others, analysts have long predicted a decline in personalized, live interaction as a tool for campaigns and the gradual disappearance of old-fashioned practices like canvassing as they are replaced by mass- and computer-mediated communication.

The basic conclusion in research on mediated politics is that while traditional political institutions (government, parties, interest groups, etc.) remain central to most political processes, they are increasingly dependent upon and shaped by the media organizations that possess the means to communicate with people, partially because the development of “parties without partisans” and the shift in interest groups and civic associations from “membership to management” has left them without the organizational capacity and raw manpower to contact people in a more personalized fashion. Even if analysts disagree about how to name the phenomenon and how developed it is, there is broad agreement on what has been called its “mutagenic” implications, the idea that while political institutions remain distinct, they are shaped by mediatization because they internalize the logics of the mass media to be able to communicate through them. Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz, who coined the term mediatization, argue that “the mass media . . . have assumed the character of ‘necessity’ in the political domain.” Manuel Castells has taken this idea to its logical extreme in his most recent work, claiming that “the media have become the social space where power is decided.”

It is important to notice in these two quotes the slide from “the mass media” to the more general “the media,” because it alerts us to an underlying premise that should make us wary of Castells’s use of the definitive singular. It is clear that communication (and thus media, defined as delivery systems) is a necessary part of politics—as it is of any social practice. Politicians and their associates need to communicate with people to reach their goals. It is less clear that particular historical formations, such as the conglomeration of mass media–based news and entertainment organizations we refer to in casual conversation as “the media,” are necessary. Indeed, if one takes a step back from exceptional events like American presidential elections, it is sometimes striking how little news coverage politics attracts, how few political advertisements are present in the vast sea of marketing, and how ingenious political organizations are when it comes to finding ways of communicating that are not dependent on (autonomous) journalists or (expensive) advertising. The two
congressional campaigns I followed, two of the most competitive House races in the entire country, were each subject to just a few dozen articles in the main regional and local papers throughout all of 2008 and very little television coverage. The traditional mass media, and with them a central part of the mediatization thesis, do not look like all they are purported to be when you can cram the total accumulated coverage of the candidates in an important federal election onto a few newspaper pages. This dearth of journalistic attention and the harsh competition for eyeballs for advertisements is part of the reason why practices of personalized political communication remain stubbornly alive despite all predictions of their imminent demise.

There simply is no evidence that supports the idea of a consistent decline of face-to-face communication in politics in the United States. There have been some variations, as figure 1.1 documents, and the mass media have grown throughout the twentieth century—and grown increasingly powerful and important, no doubt—but they have not crowded out everything else nor put an end to the development of other practices of communication. Campaigns need to spread the word, and they cannot rely on “the media” alone to do it, no matter how much they massage reporters or how many thirty-second television spots they buy. There is simply too much content out there, too little attention being paid. Hence, campaigns develop what political operatives call a “layered” approach. They rely not only on advertisements and news coverage but also on direct mail, digital marketing, and field operations. As Barack Obama’s campaign manager, David Plouffe, put it, the goal is “to be on our target voters’ network TV, cable, satellite, and on-demand; on their radios; all over the internet; in their mailboxes; on their landlines and their cell phones . . . [and] at their doorsteps. . . . Balanced communications across all mediums is critical in any messaging effort today.”

From a campaign staff point of view, people are just one medium among many. Research in political communication needs to deal with all of these different layers and to recognize that while some forms of political communication have faded away over time (we do not see many torchlight processions these days), they rarely follow one another in a neat succession of distinct epochs, as some would have it.

Different practices of political communication seem to coexist and to be mixed and matched by campaigns on the basis of their own perceived interests, the ideas and know-how they have, the resources at their disposal, and the communications environment around them.

Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, when the three national television networks reached more than 50 million Americans every evening and regional newspaper monopolies reached most households in “their” media markets, it might have made sense to base one’s strategy primarily on paid and earned media. But that is no longer the communications
environment in which campaigns operate. The more or less monolithic mass media began to crumble in the 1990s, faced with the rise of cable TV and later the Internet. Consultants and senior campaign staffers are acutely aware of this. When asked to explain the rationale behind investments in seemingly old-fashioned practices of personalized political communication, political operatives point not only to research documenting its impact or to the development of new tools like the predictive modeling algorithms and online-integrated database technology that facilitate field operations today. They also talk about several current trends discussed in the academic study of communications. They point to problems of oversaturation, sometimes bringing up the idea that individual Americans are subject to several thousand advertising messages every day, and argue that this situation blunts the impact of television advertisements and direct mail. They point to an increasing audience fragmentation, where the spread of cable television, falling newspaper circulation, and the increasing proliferation of specialized publications online and offline combined with vast disparities in people’s interest in political information make it ever more difficult to reach a broad audience through any one given media. Finally, they point to the oft-documented limited effects of mass communication and direct mail when it comes to actually influencing people’s immediate political behavior, in terms of both voting preferences and turnout.

The combination of these developments makes it particularly difficult for campaigns to communicate effectively with key targets like swing voters and infrequently voting partisans—many of whom pay little attention to news and who frequently are not interested in (or even decidedly disenchanted with) electoral politics. Given the litany of complaints, any kind of communication that, like personalized political communication, allows for unique contacts that stand out from the media torrent, reaches a clearly defined universe of individual targets, and has measurable effects starts to look attractive to campaigns involved in close races. Back in 1992, after the midterm elections, political scientist Paul S. Herrnson surveyed hundreds of congressional campaigns and found that staffers rated door-to-door campaigning well below paid and earned media in terms of impact and importance. When he repeated the study after the 2002 midterm elections, he found that operatives now saw ground war practices as among the most effective means of communication, more so than television advertisements, email, or the Internet.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the strategies and priorities of the major parties have gradually come to reflect this change of mind among political operatives. In the 1990s parties and campaigns allegedly turned away willing volunteers because they did not know what to use them for. Today they are clamoring for help because labor-intensive
field operations again have become a key concern in competitive races, a central part of their strategy. This resurgent interest in the use of people as media is important because it has led to the increased number of contacts we have seen in the first decade of the twenty-first century and has had a clear impact on electoral results—especially by increasing voter turnout. But personalized political communication is also important because of the implications its large-scale pursuit has for political organizations themselves and for those involved—it constitutes one of the main forms of political participation available today. Field operations affect electoral outcomes, this we know. What is less often discussed is that they also have their own “mutagenic” implications for the forms that campaigns take. Changing strategic priorities with a greater emphasis on phone calls and door knocks are driving today’s political campaigns toward a slightly more open and inclusive form than what we have known during the last decades of the twentieth century.

**THE PURSUIT OF PERSONALIZED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

Ground wars are *projects*, distinct and temporary tasks defined by clear criteria for success—that is, victory—and an equally clear deadline: Election Day. They depend on many factors, including the overall political and economic climate, the demographics of the district at hand, the nature of the competition, and the resources available. Most of these variables are not under the control of those involved in a given campaign. In the United States, decennial redistricting carried out in oft-distant state capitols; the cold, dead hands of the Founding Fathers who defined the electoral system; and the processes that lead to the nomination of whoever a candidate happens to be running against have a large say in how a given ground war will be waged. In a district that for one reason or another is not competitive, personalized political communication may not even be worth the trouble (and as we shall see, it involves a lot of trouble)—and only 10–20 percent of all congressional elections are effectively competitive, with only a dozen or so states in play at the presidential level. But in close elections, every little bit counts. A common saying among political operatives is that a good field program can make a difference of between 1 and 5 percent. There is certainly more art than science to such estimates, but, as mentioned above, research at least documents that field can make a difference. A few percent may not sound like a lot, but remember that six of the sixteen postwar presidential elections were decided by less than a 5 percent margin. So were four Senate races and thirty-three races for the House of Representatives in 2008 alone. In such cases, as in
competitive elections at all levels, a good ground game can be decisive, and the work of putting together a set of elements to pursue it begins when consultants and staffers think their candidate may be within striking distance of victory.

I call such a set, arranged around a common ground war project in a particular district, a campaign assemblage. I use the concept to refer to a heterogeneous collection of elements engaged in concerted action. The notion of an “assemblage” is appropriated from recent work in social theory, organizational sociology, and science and technology studies. A campaign assemblage is not a thing “out there” in the sense that a human being is, but rather a name for a combination of technologically augmented organizations, groups, and individuals whose combined capacities for action are brought to bear on a shared project. In a few corners of the United States, where the finely meshed networks associated with the parties and political machines of yore still exist or have found new forms, one can perhaps think of personalized political communication as something pursued by a single organization or as a set of firmly institutionalized practices. In parts of Boston, Chicago, or Philadelphia, an identifiable set of trans-organizational routines may recur from election to election, cycle after cycle, as the same people gather at the behest of the powers that be and spread the word to the voters. But, as I show in chapter 2, this is not the standard scenario today.

Episode 1.4
“What about the unions and the party? Won’t they do much of the work for you?” I ask. The senior staffer looks at me for a moment, then says, “I wish. First of all, the unions aren’t what they used to be. Second, we don’t always get along so well—think NAFTA and all that. Third, what party? That, too, is sort of crumbling, at least on the ground, and where it’s not, there are usually various complications.” “Like what?” “Ah, you know, people have their own agendas.”

The major parties in America, and their most important respective allies, have changed, and even the most powerful cannot provide a complete ground war machinery. The ground war is only partially institutionalized and is fundamentally dependent on the active, dynamic, and contingent creation of temporary and ad-hoc campaign assemblages. Campaign organizations, the unevenly professionalized temporary vehicles set up around candidates, are not in a position to do all the work themselves either. Take the two districts where I did my research. According to the Federal Election Committee, Jim Himes: Democrat for Congress spent a total of $3.9 million in 2008, Linda Stender for Congress $2.6 million. (In both districts national, state, and local party committees and many
other allies spent substantial sums on top of that.) In Connecticut’s 4th district the Democratic candidate’s expenditures alone came to $13 per vote cast on Election Day; in New Jersey’s 7th, $9 per vote. (By way of comparison, Barack Obama’s campaign raised and spent close to $750 million on the presidential race, or a little less than $6 per vote cast across the country.) In addition to buying some television advertisements and a lot of direct mail, these millions of dollars were used to build campaign organizations that grew from basically being the candidate and a fundraising operation in the winter and early spring of the election year, to a nucleus of senior staffers (campaign manager, finance director, communications director, field director, and a few more to assist them) by the late spring, and finally into a fully articulated operation with about twenty full-time staffers by June.

More than half of a campaign’s staff work on the ground war effort. They all share an instrumental view of what they are doing. They are, in the words of one, “in it to win it.” Apart from the field director and intermediary staff such as the deputy field director, the canvassing director, and the volunteer coordinator (if there is one), most of the staffers working on the ground war are recent college graduates or students taking a semester off from school. This, then, is what a well-funded congressional campaign organization in a competitive district has available for the ground war: a handful of people with a few cycles’ worth of experience and a dozen new recruits. There is simply no way that these people alone, most of whom will be working on the campaign for less than six months, can meet the goal of contacting 20 percent of the electorate in a district—about a hundred thousand people—in person.

So to accomplish this goal, wider campaign assemblages are brought together. When I refer simply to “campaigns,” these assemblages are what I refer to. The notion of assemblages is useful here not only because it can encompass the whole set of actors involved in field operations (and not only the staffers in the campaign organization), but also because its invocation of the verb “assemble” highlights the work that goes into holding these temporary teams together. Campaigns look like monolithic entities only when seen from afar. Up close it becomes clear that they are composites of temporary campaign organizations, durable allied organizations, and hundreds or even thousands of individual volunteers and part-timers enrolled for the duration of the project. The ground war in a single congressional district involves not only the candidate’s campaign organization, the staffers who populate it, and the consultants they contract with. It also involves, with variations from place to place, the campaign organizations of other candidates (running for everything from president to the board of education); the state party; one or more of the party campaign committees from the state capital or Washington, D.C.; local party organizations
and political entrepreneurs; allied interest groups such as unions, activist groups, and sympathetic civic associations (whether religious-, ethnic-, or issue-based); plus communities of volunteers and part-timers. The various allies involved blur normal distinctions between different advocacy or interest group coalitions and have machine regulars and reformers, manufacturing unions and environmentalists, affordable housing advocates and lobbyists for developers temporarily working together side by side, sharing the same ground war project—often because they hope for something in return if the candidate wins.

The volunteers and part-timers involved are recruited as individuals (but from very different and only partially overlapping demographic groups). Hundreds of volunteers come in and help out on a congressional campaign for everywhere between a few hours once to dozens of hours a week for months. They come with different expectations—some want to write speeches or work on policy, others just to “help.” All will be asked to canvass and phone bank. (See figure 1.2 for a list of the volunteer opportunities advertised by the New Jersey campaign.) Depending on district demographics, they tend to be white, college-educated, older, and often affluent. They are typically motivated by political partisanship, a sense of citizenship, and sometimes a love of the game. They want to win, but they also see campaigns as a communal activity and a form of civic engagement.

Staffers have ambivalent relations with volunteers. On the one hand, volunteers are widely recognized as the most effective ambassadors for the candidate and the party. “Volunteers are the best, no doubt about it,” says one staffer. On the other hand, they are unpredictable, sometimes unwilling to focus on canvassing and phone banking, and occasionally so ideologically invested in the project that they are reluctant to accept tactical advice. Volunteers are often seen by staffers as “high maintenance.” “There are so many egos you need to massage,” says one volunteer coordinator, adding, “In that sense, part-timers are easier.”

Most campaigns have many more volunteers than staffers involved, but rarely enough to reach their contact goals. While political operatives and national political organizations have increased their emphasis on, and budget allocations for, field operations from the early 2000s onward and generated more and more contacts, the number of volunteers mobilized by campaigns and by local party organizations has not increased as much as the number of contacts has. Volunteer recruitment is considered progressively more important, but local networks are often weak and the work of getting people involved remains, in the words of one staffer, “haphazard” and only one among many priorities. Mobilizing people and keeping them involved has not been a major concern for parties and campaigns in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the
Volunteer Opportunities

For more information about these and any other volunteer opportunities with the Stender campaign, please call or e-mail at [insert phone number] or [insert email address] @lindastenderforcongress.com

Morning Phonebanking
Date: Daily, Monday through Friday
Time: 10:00 AM – 12:00 Noon
Location: Campaign HQ, 256 South Avenue, Fanwood, NJ

[Click Here for Directions]

Evening Phonebanking
Date: Daily, Monday through Friday
Time: 5:00 PM – 8:00 PM
Location: Campaign HQ, 256 South Avenue, Fanwood, NJ

[Click Here for Directions]

Weekday Canvassing
Date: Daily, Monday through Friday
Time: 5:00 PM – 8:00 PM
Meetup Location: Campaign HQ, 256 South Avenue, Fanwood, NJ

[Click Here for Directions]

Weekend Canvassing
Date: Saturdays
Time: 10:00 AM – 12:00 Noon or 1:00 PM – 3:00 PM
Meetup Location: Campaign HQ, 256 South Avenue, Fanwood, NJ

[Click Here for Directions]

Figure 1.2. Volunteer opportunities in New Jersey.
These were the options listed on the campaign organization’s website. (The initials in the email address have been removed to protect the staffer’s anonymity.)

number of people who volunteer has declined. As recently as the 1960s and early 1970s, the American National Election Studies routinely found that 5–6 percent of all respondents reported having worked for a candidate or campaign during election time. But the number fell throughout the 1980s and 1990s and reached a nadir of 2 percent in 1996. Even with a renewed focus on volunteer recruitment by campaigns, participation
Figure 1.3. Worked for a party or candidate 1956–2008.
Question: “Did you do any (other) work for one of the parties or candidates?”
(Beyond attending a meeting, wearing a button, or donating money.)
Source: American National Election Studies, 1956–2008 (presidential election years only).

has been inching upward only slowly since then, reaching 4 percent in 2008 (see figure 1.3). As one senior staffer said to me, “We never get enough volunteers; we always want more.”

**Episode 1.5**

Election Day is less than two weeks away, and John, the field director, is stressed out. “It’s usually about now that I start having trouble sleeping and get heart palpitations.” Over a slice of pizza with salami and a can of Dr. Pepper, he spends his five-minute break explaining that the campaign needs to fill eighteen hundred volunteer shifts and find about two hundred people for eight hundred paid canvassing shifts before the GOTV weekend kicks off.

He is pretty strung out and hard to have a sustained conversation with, but I ask him how things are coming along. He is tapping his feet incessantly as he says, “Well, you know we’ve got about sixty paid canvassers already, and all the guys are out recruiting. I think we have maybe a hundred signed up. All the organizers will have to work every day recruiting.” “What about volunteers?” I ask. “You’ll have to ask Jack about that. I think he said he has about a hundred and sixty scheduled, so you can imagine. He has a lot of work to do.”

Despite their pronounced preference for relying on volunteers and on allies (most of whom can rarely mobilize large numbers of members for personalized political communication), the two campaigns I followed eventually ended up employing about two hundred people working part-time as paid
canvassers or phone bankers for ten dollars an hour or so—people like Charlene in episode 1.1. Their use of paid casual labor is hardly unique. Unions and other interest groups also sometimes find they have to pay people to do work when they have too few member activists to do the job.39 Even the Barack Obama campaign, with its estimated 3 million volunteers, also resorted to paid phone banks in 2008.40 Staffers have ambivalent relations to part-timers too; on the one hand, they are aware that part-time workers are not always the best ambassadors for the cause—poorly trained and motivated as they often are—but on the other hand, part-timers are seen as more dependable than volunteers. And as one campaign manager put it, “It is more important that we do field than that we have volunteers do it.” Paid part-timers are used to close the gap between the ambitious contact goals that staffers set for themselves and what they expect they can accomplish with the help of allies and volunteers.

Those who are hired for this work are predominantly either young students who do it on the side of their studies to earn a little cash or people (some of them older) who need the money to tide them over because they find themselves without permanent employment. In the districts I researched, there were many more blacks and Latinos among part-timers than among the volunteers. Some part-timers care about politics, and all would like “their” candidate to win, but most say they are mainly involved for the weekly paycheck. For them, campaigning is a casual job. And it is sold to them primarily as such, not as a political or civic enterprise (see the recruitment flyers from New Jersey reproduced in figure 1.4).41 Staffers may be rather particular about whom they hire for these jobs to begin with, but this quickly comes to an end as the imbalance between supply and demand becomes clear. One field organizer, in the span of two months, went from describing who he was looking for to do part-time paid canvassing as “Someone local, who knows the community and who cares about politics” to the rather less demanding idea that “We need people who aren’t crazy and don’t look crazy.” (In 2000 Jon Corzine’s campaign for Senate memorably ended up busing in men hired en masse at homeless shelters in Pennsylvania for its GOTV weekend in neighboring New Jersey.) “You should see some of the people who come in,” the field organizer added. I did see them, and they were ordinary Americans, most of them either uninterested in politics and simply taking the job to earn a little on the side or people who had found themselves in a tough spot where any job was better than no job.

Episode 1.6
Luis is still short of his recruitment goals for the paid canvass, and when I ask him about them, he shrugs and says, “I’ve stopped thinking of it as two hundred people; now I’m just trying to fill all eight hundred shifts. I just need
Figure 1.4. Two flyers used for part-time recruitment in New Jersey. One was used in September and October ($10/hour), the other for GOTV weekend ($75/shift). (The initials in the email address have been removed to protect the staffer’s anonymity.)

more bodies.” He shakes his head and continues: “I’d have loved to have, you know, teams of kids canvassing their home turf wearing their local high school sweatshirt. But we’re short, so that’s not going to happen.” On the wall behind him is a black-and-white photocopied flyer that he picks up and hands to me. “Have you seen this?”

It is an irregularly cut half page of letter-size paper with a stylized drawing of a donkey—a common mascot symbol for the Democratic Party—trumpeting “Campaign Jobs” in a large font. The subtitle reads “Easy work! Great Pay!” A month and a half earlier, the campaign tried to recruit part-timers to go
canvassing for the Democratic Party. Two weeks ago the flyers were encou-
gaging people to work to “Get Obama elected” (in a solidly pro-Democratic 
state). Now it has come to this. Luis says, “That’s my favorite slogan so far. 
Fuck Obama, fuck the party. Easy job, great pay, that’s what it’s all about.” He 
shakes his head and turns to his computer.

Staffers like Luis, a canvassing director, spend a lot of their time tied to 
their desk in front of their computers. Political ground wars, like the 
rather more dramatic forms of warfare they take their name from, are 
deeply dependent on back-end logistics and increasingly tied in with new 
information and communication technologies—a whole range of mun-
dane, emerging, and specialized tools used for communicating with con-
stituents, mobilizing volunteers, organizing work, and targeting voters.42 
The most important back-end tools involved in personalized political 
communication are a combination of databases and online-integrated 
interfaces used for planning canvassing and phone banking, gathering 
response data from voters, and targeting them for further contacts.

EPIsODE 1.7 
Luis says, “All those databases, microtargeting, and all that stuff, it really has 
changed campaigns a lot. It used to be all about TV; now it’s more like a junk 
mail company, you know? We’re trying to reach out to people in person.” I ask 
him to give examples of what has changed, and he says, “Where do you want 
me to begin? I mean, just back in 2006 we didn’t have a turf-cutter, so I had to 
pull a list of voters from each precinct, then export it to Excel, then import it 
to Microsoft Streets and Names, call up all the pushpins on a map, mark the 
map with a line around the area—which then wouldn’t really be the precinct, 
but what the hell—then remove the pins and print it. That would be my master 
copy.” He laughs and says, “It took me a weekend and a half to cut the turf for 
all the canvassers!” 

I say that sounds convenient but hardly like a revolution, and he grows more 
serious and responds, “Look, this has led to a much better field. Now that the 
party maintains those databases, we can use all these new kinds of targeting, 
meaning that we can, when we need to, reach much larger universes of vot-
ers for persuasion and for GOTV [get-out-the-vote]. Sometimes we joke—you 
know, ‘What did we do before the Internet?’—but seriously, we wouldn’t have 
had such a large ground game this year if the consultants hadn’t been able to 
identify so many targets for us.”

Despite some hopeful prognostications to the contrary, the rise of the 
Internet and the development of new, networked “social media” has not 
brrought about a massive increase in popular participation in politics or 
radically empowered citizen activists to take on entrenched interests.
A few exceptional outliers aside (like Howard Dean in the Democratic presidential primary in 2004 and Ron Paul in the Republican presidential primary in 2008), most political organizations use available information and communication technologies to supplement, extend, and augment existing practices, not to transform them. The most important new tools adopted by field campaigns in the 2000s are predictive modeling algorithms leveraging vast amounts of data kept by the political parties in online-accessible databases and continuously updated by the response data generated by campaigns themselves. The “new political targeting” has emerged as an increasingly dominant targeting scheme in Democratic field efforts. It allows campaigns to target individual voters for persuasion and activation with greater accuracy and expands the universe of potentially “valuable” targets beyond what could be identified in the past.43 The notion of campaign assemblages is used here to unpack the black box of field operations; to conceptualize its relational character; and to grasp how interdependent, loosely coupled elements develop the capacity to pursue personalized political communication together, all the time retaining their distinct character as they eschew formal organization and fail to solidify into anything one would recognize as a single entity or institution. All the different actors touched on above—the campaign organizations and the staffers working in them, various allied groups and organizations, the communities of volunteers and part-timers—and the technologies they rely on play a role in the story told in the rest of this book. All are involved in the pursuit of electoral victory; all can tell us something about political communication, political organizations, and political participation. Each campaign assemblage contains both old elements and routines and new components and challenges, each involves both temporary and durable organizations, and the evidence suggests that they differ from party to party and from district to district.44 The ground war machinery assembled around Democratic candidates in a particular district does not have the solidity and stable characteristics of the Democratic Party in the same place. (Even the latter is, of course, a complicated contraption.) In fact, many people who are working hard to get a particular candidate elected balk at the idea that they are involved in a capital-D Democratic campaign, preferring more general notions such as “liberal” or “progressive” and making it clear that, to quote one activist, “we are not doing it for their sake.”

This suggests how—in contrast to advertisement time or direct mail blasts—the use of people as media (however recruited) comes at a price for campaign organizations that goes beyond simply writing a check. People can be unruly, and the same activist energies that can help put a Barack Obama or a Ronald Reagan in the White House can also propel a George McGovern or a Barry Goldwater to the top of the ticket. While
all the people involved in a campaign assemblage recognize the electoral project and want to win, different elements have different motivations, different views of what is and ought to be going on, and they are rarely accountable to the campaign and its manager the way subordinates in the campaign organization itself are. This situation is a cause for great concern and constant consternation for staffers striving to control what is going on, and it is just one example of how personalized political communication has implications well beyond its instrumental impact.

STUDYING PERSONALIZED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Most of the work that goes in to ground war projects takes place in a back region that we know little about. Campaigns’ internal documents are rarely made available to researchers, and in any case they capture only part of what is going on. The millions of contacts made are ephemeral and leave no qualitative record that speaks to their dynamics. Thus, to get at the inner workings and intricate details of the ground war, the bulk of my analysis is based on my own original ethnographic fieldwork. The appendix at the end of this book discusses the research approach in detail, but here are the basics: From February until November 2008 I engaged in participant-observation in two congressional districts (Connecticut’s 4th and New Jersey’s 7th), focusing in each case on the campaign assemblage that evolved around the Democratic candidate for the House of Representatives (Jim Himes and Linda Stender, respectively). I chose these two districts because they looked likely to be competitive races with considerable stakes and thus good examples of how well-funded, high-priority, federal-level campaigns pursue personalized political communication. For ten months I attended local party meetings, visited various political organizations and associations (from powerful unions to marginal activist groups), and, especially during the last three months, worked practically around the clock alongside staffers, volunteers, and part-timers on the ground. The result was firsthand experience with the look, feel, and everyday practice of electoral politics, retained in the more than one thousand pages of field notes I wrote.

In the one sense that matters most to those involved, the two campaigns could not be more different—Jim Himes won, Linda Stender lost. But this aside, their internal operations were similar enough that throughout this book I stress mostly the commonalities between them as examples of how campaign assemblages built around Democratic candidates pursue personalized political communication in competitive elections today. To supplement the data from my fieldwork, I have conducted fifty-nine off-site interviews with people involved, both directly in the districts and
through various other parts of the assemblages based in Washington, D.C., the respective state capitals, and elsewhere (campaign committees, data and software providers, and consultant companies). Finally, I have gone through what was—until Barack Obama started winning states in the Democratic presidential primary—a limited amount of news coverage of ground war operations in various campaigns.

Interviews and secondary sources have played an important supplementary role in developing my argument, but they would have been insufficient on their own. When you talk with people about what they do, they are likely to, consciously or unconsciously, provide a very selective version. Although I did learn a lot through such conversations, a lot of the material from my interviews basically suggests that everything done is effective, that everybody is good at what they are doing, and that everyone works together smoothly. (As it happens, it turns out that this is only one part of the story.) Secondary sources are also useful additions but again have a similar performative dimension that one must take into account. News coverage is oriented toward the spectacular and often limited to the story the professionals want to tell about their effort—how well it works, how much it matters, how finely targeted it is. Many political operatives I spoke with marveled at, for example, how effectively Republican operatives had shaped the news coverage of the Bush-Cheney field operations during the 2004 presidential elections. Others were equally impressed with how well journalistic writings about the Obama effort in 2008 were spun by the campaign.

What you see on the ground is rather different and rarely put on display. Outsiders are not particularly welcome behind the scenes. In my experience, even when volunteers and part-timers turned out to be open-hearted, many of the staffers and consultants were professional paranoids (even when promised anonymity). Much information on contact numbers, volunteer recruitment, and sources of funding was kept from me; many meetings off-limits; and many documents never made available, even after the campaigns were over. Often it was only when instrumental interests overrode concerns about secrecy that information was shared with me—so passwords that had been guarded jealously one week would be handed over the next if that meant I could train a few volunteers to make phone calls or enter data about voters.

The fact that I took upon myself such tasks flows from the idea that ethnographic fieldwork is based on social exchange. In addition to making it more difficult to maintain the conventional scientific standing as an outside observer, this means that what you get depends on what you give. In ground war operations the fieldworker enters an assemblage built around a shared goal—that of winning the election—and must find one or more roles that can secure continued access without compromising
the validity of the study or standing in the way of that purpose. There is no room for tourists on campaigns. I engaged in participant-observation, typically assuming the position of what some staffers call a “super-volunteer,” someone whom they can depend on to show up when promised and who will “do the work” without too much goofing off. I tried to follow a classic ethnographic dictum and did what I could to avoid situations where my opinions would be solicited. I also turned down repeated job offers, thinking that going fully “native” as a field organizer would severely truncate the view I could get of the wider assemblage. Basically I offered the campaigns some of my time in exchange for some access and considerable freedom of movement, and the informal deal remained more or less intact until the elections were over. The data I have no doubt remain incomplete in some details, but do, I believe, capture a larger picture nonetheless.

In this chapter I have situated the study of personalized political communication in relation to existing work on political communication, political organizations, and political participation and have provided a basic outline of my argument about the development of ground war practices, campaign forms, and how they are related to civic engagement and democracy. Chapter 2 further elaborates the setting by tracing the recent history of—and controversies around—personalized political communication in the Democratic Party in particular. These parts provide the starting point. The central question, pursued in greater detail in the remaining chapters, remains how personalized political communication is pursued by American campaigns, how it is produced by assemblages arranged around ground war projects and faced with a fast-approaching deadline on Election Day—and what that means for American democracy.

I had no idea that the Obama campaign would put such emphasis on field operations and personalized political communication when I began developing this project in the fall of 2007. But precisely because many of the practices pursued by the Obama campaign, dependent as they were on the extraordinary amounts of money and numbers of volunteers that the candidate attracted, were so exceptional, I am glad they are not at the centerpiece of this book. I chose competitive congressional districts because they seemed more likely to serve as what sociologist Robert K. Merton has called “strategic research sites,” sites that exhibit an object of analysis in an accessible form that enables systematic scrutiny of previously untouched problems and potentially opens up new terrains for inquiry. The two cases I analyze here are cases for the study of personalized political communication as well as cases of how it is pursued by American campaigns. It is precisely because they are unexceptional but still competitive, well-funded, and important contests—and not always unique presidential elections or the more common uncontested,
moderately endowed, and always already decided races—that they provide interesting research sites. Close scrutiny here of two cases from the same party and in comparable districts has helped me identify logics I suggest are widespread throughout competitive and well-funded Democratic campaigns. I hope further research will test and no doubt revise the ideas developed here and determine how relevant they are for Republican campaigns and others too.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In chapter 2 I outline the development of the ground war in the early twenty-first century, with particular focus on the Democratic Party and its allies. I trace the resurgent interest in personalized political communication among top political operatives over the last ten years, the increased investments in field made by both campaigns and national party organizations, but also the continual slow decline in many areas of the local organizations that have historically mobilized much of the manpower needed. The “labor guys” mentioned in episode 1.3 are not as numerous as they used to be, nor are party regulars. It is in part because of the absence of a firmly institutionalized “permanent campaign” infrastructure for field operations that wider campaign assemblages are built today.

In chapter 3 I turn from the recent history of the ground war to a detailed analysis of a few of the millions of contacts made in 2008 to address the question of how personalized political communication between campaigns and voters plays out at the individual level. The interactive character of encounters between callers/canvassers and voters helps explain why personalized political communication consistently seems to go “off message” and why most of those involved find the work so stressful. Sometimes, as with Ms. Rizzo in episode 1.1, entreaties appear to come across as invasive and uncomfortable, while conversations like Paula’s with the unnamed Republican in episode 1.2 are perhaps more conventionally satisfying (though nerve-rackingly undisciplined from a staff point of view).

In chapter 4 I analyze how the diverse elements enrolled in campaign assemblages organize their pursuit of the shared ground war project, and then I return to the relations staffers have with sympathetic interest groups and with volunteers and part-timers. Here I unfold the distinctions outlined above, between the campaign organizations populated by the staffers, the wider networks of allies around them, and the communities of volunteers and part-timers enrolled to serve as media for personalized political communication. On closer inspection, the ground war turns
out to be neither the kind of “grassroots politics” that some romantics think it is, nor as thoroughly professionalized as many have suggested American campaigns are today. There I go back to the tensions illustrated by part-timer Charlene’s criticism of the areas the staffers had sent us to in episode 1.1, to the reasons Paula and the rest of the volunteers worked in a room of their own in Fanwood in episode 1.2, and to the uneasy relations between staff and volunteers hinted at in episode 1.3.

In chapter 5 I deal with how campaigns target their limited resources and decide which voters to contact. I analyze several aspects of a recently emerged and increasingly dominant new targeting scheme that integrates predictive modeling done by outside consultants, everyday work done by people in the campaigns, and the online-integrated and easily accessible national voter file maintained by the Democratic National Committee and the state parties. This new scheme dramatically improves staffers’ ability to focus efforts on persuadable voters and infrequently voting partisans and significantly expands the universe of potentially valuable targets. But, as I show, despite the availability of these methods, even some parts of the Democratic Party itself choose to opt out and pursue their own alternative targeting schemes to retain some autonomy from the national and state parties. In chapter 5 we go to Washington, D.C., and to Somerset, Massachusetts, to understand why Charlene and I found ourselves at Ms. Rizzo’s doorstep in episode 1.1, who were on the list Paula and the other volunteers called through in episode 1.2, and how the campaigns got the contact information in the first place.

Chapter 6, the penultimate part of this book (before an appendix on research methods with a more detailed discussion of some of the methodological issues touched on briefly above), presents my conclusions by relating the detailed analysis of how American campaigns pursue personalized political communication to the wider questions raised in this chapter—questions about how we understand political communication more generally, about political organizations, and about the practices and possibilities of political participation that electoral contests offer.

* * *

In this book I make a case for reinterpreting our overall understanding—and judgment—of political communication in the light of how field operations work. Even if negative advertisements and cynical news coverage spread by print, broadcast, and the Internet are “out of order” and depress voter turnout and engagement (as political communication literature sometimes permeated with something akin to distaste for its object suggests), ground wars are waged at the same time with equal vehemence by unevenly professionalized, heterogeneous, and temporary campaign
assemblages that leverage people as media for political communication in the face of considerable costs and many practical challenges to do the \textit{exact opposite} among a given candidate’s own imagined constituency: to turn them out, get them involved, and make them care, however momentarily, about politics. Ground wars are full of sound and fury; adversarial, unequal, and plagued by internal conflicts, they are far from poster children for a picture-perfect democratic process. But they are inching the actually existing American democracy toward a slightly more inclusive form. And that, I believe, is a good thing.