

PERSONALIZED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

-THE OVERLOOKED GROUND WAR

Presented at the Midwest Political Science Association's 2009 conference in Chicago

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Abstract

I will argue here that the literature on political communication has ignored and misrepresented what I call *personalized political communication*, systematic attempts to mobilize people as media for political messages through ‘ground war’ practices like door-to-door canvassing and phone banking, largely because these do not fit in the stark dichotomy between mass communication and interpersonal communication that has structured the field since the pioneering work of Lazarsfeld. I will introduce the category through a discussion of how recent work such as that of Norris deal with the ground war, and then provide evidence that it is pursued with great intensity, even in what is thought of as the most heavily ‘mediatized’ and depersonalized political arena of all, U.S. Federal Elections. I then identify the origins of our ignorance in the work of Lazarsfeld, and survey what recent work can teach us about the communicative practices that have been left out. Finally, I discuss what we can learn through a focus on personalized political communication, in particular in relation to the civic engagement debate that connects research on political communication with the work of, amongst others, Putnam and Skocpol.

Introduction

A problem with political communication research today is that it does not care about people. It does not care about the approximately one hundred million people who were contacted in person through canvassing or phone calls during the 2004 election cycle in the United States. It does not care about the literally millions of people who did the contacting. It does not care about the people who faced the challenge of organizing and mobilizing for this massive exercise in what I will call *personalized political communication*—including ‘ground war’ practices such as door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, and potentially messages sent from person to person through private online social networks. I will argue here that the literature on political communication has ignored and misrepresented these people and practices because they do not fit in the stark dichotomy between mass communication and interpersonal communication that has structured the field since the pioneering work of Paul F. Lazarsfeld. In this line of thought, people have been thought of either as mass media insiders or audiences, or as informally talking amongst themselves. I will argue here that we should move beyond the dichotomy mass/interpersonal that has blinded us to sometimes very large-scale efforts to systematically organize and mobilize *people* as media. The notion of personalized political communication is suggested here to bring this to light.

Personalized political communication is ‘personalized’ insofar as precisely *people* are media. It is thus distinct from mass-mediated or computer-mediated communications, the traditional foci of political communications research. In 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. It is ‘political’ in the most ecumenical senses of the word, i.e., in that the people engaged in it perceive it to be political, the organizations involved are generally perceived to be political, and most of the content disseminated have direct bearing on the authoritative distribution of values and the constitution of society. It is ‘communication’ in the most basic sense of a process for sharing symbols in time and space, symbols that, as we shall see below, go well beyond the lexical content of the words involved, and come to involve commitment, attitude, and sometimes gender and skin color too.

I will introduce and position the category on the basis of a discussion of how recent work such as that of Pippa Norris ignore and misrepresent the ground war, and then provide evidence that it is in fact pursued with great intensity, even in what is often thought of as the most heavily ‘mediatized’ political arena of all, U.S. federal elections. I then identify the origins of our ignorance in the work of Lazarsfeld and his collaborators, and gather the bits of what recent work in political science and elsewhere can teach us about the communicative practices that have been left out. In the concluding part, I return to discuss what it will mean for our understanding of political communication to add the category of personalized political communication and rehabilitate people as media—a point of particular importance in relation to the civic engagement debate that connects research on political communication with the work of, amongst others, Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol.

So the basic problem is this: the practices I argue we should understand as instances of personalized political communication are ill at ease with the dichotomies that

normally divide labor in the field of political communication. Two closely related distinctions are at play here. One is between ‘mass’ and ‘interpersonal’ (sometimes called ‘social’) communication. The other is between ‘mediated’ and ‘direct’ communication. The problem with these dichotomies is not simply that they are ‘artificial’—our categories typically are—but that they are sometimes unuseful, because they give us binaries where we could and should have typologies, and that they therefore obfuscates the workings of a whole host of communicative practices and forms that are not easily located on one or the other side (more on these problems below). I suggest we expand the typology, and define the category ‘personalized political communication’ as communicative practices that are systematically pursued with political intent through people working as media. Think of a widespread example such as canvassing. It is not broadcast or mediated through technological artifacts, as mass political communication is. It is instead delivered point-to-point and mediated through human agents, recognizable individual people. But it is also premeditated, systematically organized for particular purposes, and thus while the interactions between a particular canvasser and those canvassed may be understood as informal and direct—as interpersonal communication—the canvass as political communication between an organization with an ideology or message and the person at the receiving end is neither.¹

Why does it matter? In inconclusive arguments that echo back and forth between scholars, professionals, and activists, it is suggested that the retrenchment of the news

¹ Let me just point out here that the intersection between interpersonal communication and politics itself is of course also a very important topic, and has generated many substantial contributions (cf. Walsh, 2004 and *Communication Theory*’s special issue on “conversation and campaigns”, Volume 19, Issue 1, February 2009).

media, the continued fragmentation of mass audiences, the declining effectiveness of advertisement, and an exponentially increasing competition for people's attention, combined with the proliferation of means of resistance against mass communication (from TiVos that allow one to skip the ads to the proliferation of distributed news analysis and alternative sources of information on the internet that may counter-weight the evening news) all fuel a search for new effective forms of political communication (cf. Bennett & Entman 2001, Prior, 2007). And even—maybe even *especially*—in the arguably most media-saturated and mass-communicated political spectacle the world has ever witnessed, federal elections in the United States, professionals and activists alike are developing practices of personalized political communication based on careful targeting, individual contacts, and the instrumentalization of existing social ties. If I can make the case that people matter as media *there*, in the eye of the storm of mass mediated political communication, it should offer encouragement for other people too—insurgent candidates of all stripes, social movements, and marginalized organizations that find that they cannot break through to the institutionalized mass media, and do not have the resources to buy advertisements, build their own media infrastructure, or the opportunity to appropriate one. If one can rehabilitate people as media for political communication in U.S. federal elections, then the case has been made that the woman at your door urging you to join, the man on the street with the flyer, asking you to help, and the volunteer who calls to invite you to a meeting are not acting in vain, and hence all who can marshal people as media can fight to spread the word, whether they garner mass media attention or not, and generate a form of civic engagement as they go along.

Personalized political communication in post-industrial societies

And this is exactly what the literature on political communication largely ignores. A survey of key journals, recent readers, and much-used textbooks suggests that practices of personalized political communication have no place in political communication research today. Over the last decade, the journal *Political Communication* has published a few articles on small group conversations, but nothing on field operations, phone banking, or the like. Ralph Negrine and James Stanyer's recent *The Political Communication Reader* has nothing either. Widely used textbooks such as Trent and Friedenbergs' *Political Campaign Communications* deal with candidate-voter interpersonal communication, but offers little more than description on the broader issues of the ground war.

But though they do express the received wisdom and dominant research priorities of a field, journals, readers, and textbooks are perhaps too easy targets. A harder target could be a work that explicitly claims to provide an overview of 'political communications in postindustrial societies'—the subtitle of Pippa Norris' (2000) *A Virtuous Circle*. Winner of the 2006 Doris Graber Book Award, given by the Political Communications Section of the American Political Science Association to the best book of the decade, and, according to the publisher's web site, praised in a review in *Political Communication* as "the most comprehensive and thoughtful analysis" of political communication "to date", it is highly influential and widely quoted—and with good reason, as it represents some of the most insightful and ambitious recent scholarship in the field. It is also instructive because the author does not mince words. Unlike the emerita of the field, Doris Graber, who in the very title of her most widely read book

makes it clear that she is concerned with *Mass Media and American Politics*, Norris' ambition is "a systematic examination of the role of political communication in post-industrial societies" (2000: 3). Everything is up for review.

On the basis of her own research and an extensive review of the literature on newspapers, television, internet, and changes in campaign practices, Norris challenges what she calls the 'media malaise' thesis (that processes of political communication are partly to blame for declines in civic engagement) and instead draw our attention to what she calls a 'virtuous circle' of consistently positive correlations between attention to news and political knowledge, trust, and participation. Her book mentions some ground war practices in passing, but does little to deal with them. A closer look at what Norris nonetheless has to say on the subject shows why a more detailed answer to the question of what position personalized political communication occupies in the literature must go beyond pointing out that it is largely ignored, and recognize that when it is not, it is subject to two kinds of misrepresentations. First, Norris employs a modernization trope that is endemic in the broader literature too. Secondly, she relies on the unhandy dichotomies between 'mass' and 'interpersonal' and, especially, 'direct' and 'mediated' communication, which guides her focus towards almost exclusive attention to mass media and internet mediation through technological *artifacts*, and thus makes her systematic overview a truncated one. Let me go through each problem in turn.

When brought up at all, personalized political communication is typically described as 'traditional', 'old-fashioned', and the like (Hernnson 2004, Bennett & Entman 2001). Norris' claim that political communication is undergoing an "evolutionary

process of *modernization*” (2000: 137, her italics) makes explicit what these common tropes entail. In the fashion of sixties modernization theory, Norris outlines a supposedly uniform standard evolutionary pattern stretching from ‘pre-modern’ over ‘modern’ and to ‘post-modern’ campaigns, the last being allegedly the “last stage” (2000: 147) of the modernization process. With somewhat different wordings, others have employed similar tropes, and identified various ‘ages’ or ‘styles’ of political communication neatly arranged along a historical continuum (Blumler and Kavenagh 1999, Howard 2006). Such modernization tropes misrepresent personalized political communication in a dual fashion. First, it is often simply assumed to be absent from the supposed culmination of history, at least in the dominant forms of campaigning, and thus not even subject to inquiry. Norris, for instance, suggests that ‘traditional campaigns’ are still pursued in local races and by “minor parties without generous financial resources” (2000: 142). Secondly, the reification of something as *modern* (television, radio, etc) at the moment it is new in opposition to what is handed down (canvassing, leaflets, etc) as *traditional* blind us to the development of the supposedly old-fashioned. Norris writes that “technological change” has made the ground war “ancillary” to mass political communication (2000: 142). But though it have a longer history, personalized political communication is no more inherently ‘traditional’ or ‘pre-modern’ than mass political communication is ‘modern’, just as the latter is by no means certain to supersede the former due to ‘evolutionary processes’. They simply coexist with various degrees of integration in historically specific ways. Personalized political communication is still very much with us, and it not only done in the ways it used to be.

Three contemporary examples of high-tech elements involved illustrate how door-to-door campaigning develops just as advertisement and media handling does. First, whereas the canvass in the fifties was targeted on the basis of printed voter files and whatever precinct captains knew about their turf, campaigns today increasingly rely on data-mining of vast amounts of personal information accumulated from voting records, consumer patterns, and party canvasses to pin-point individual voters for contact. Both the Republican National Committee, its Democratic counterpart, and companies such as Harold M. Ickes' Catalist works with building these databases and developing their use. Secondly, in high-stakes and well-funded races, the clipboard is sometimes replaced by the Palm Pilots and Personal Digital Assistants that both 527s like America Coming Together (ACT) and the Republican Party used in get-out-the-vote efforts in Ohio in the 2004 presidential election to allow canvassers to communicate results and information about voters in real time to organizers and headquarters, partly to feed them into the databases used in targeting and messaging. Finally, the parties, organizations, and movements who get involved in personalized political communication seem to be increasingly reliant on internet-assistance to supplement existing technologies in their organizing efforts. Beyond famous examples like MoveOn, think of the Democratic Party's 'PartyBuilder' platform, and of a labor effort such as the SEIU's 'purple ocean' site and their attempts to revamp the sites of their locals. All these examples illustrate developments of personalized political communication that cannot be captured by evolutionary narratives couched in terms of the traditional and the modern, developments that cannot be understood if we rely on modernization tropes.

The second misrepresentation of personalized political communication is based on the dichotomies between ‘mass’ and ‘interpersonal’ communication, between ‘mediated’ and ‘direct’ communicative practices, and the idea that canvassing and the like belong to the latter category. The concepts are more bureaucratic names for sub-disciplines than clearly defined tools for analysis, but interpersonal communication is often thought of as communications where those involved are interdependent, few in number, and in close physical proximity. It is clear that this hardly captures the relation between a thousand canvassers and those canvassed. Again, Norris’ work can serve to illustrate a widespread problem, and again it is of minor importance in an evaluation of her work on *mass* political communication, but truncates our wider understanding of ‘political communication in post-industrial societies’, her explicit object of analysis, if we limit ourselves to her cursory treatment of *personalized* political communication. Norris’ (2000: 14) schematic model of political communication allows us to locate the problem. She bases her argument on a model of communication involving a *sender*, a *medium*, and a *receiver* operating under whatever exogenous conditions happen to be in place—sender is ‘self’, receiver is ‘other’, and the medium is what allows for the sharing of symbols. Her model is perfectly in line with a whole genealogy of so-called ‘transmissions models’ of communication that despite persistent criticisms has guided much research. The formal properties of these models show what is at stake in the distinction between mediated and direct communication that Norris (2000: 142) relies on: communication without media, without a channel. Even if we accept that this idea is appropriate for understanding the interaction between, say, a particular candidate and a prospective voter in the fashion of

interpersonal communication research, it remains a misrepresentation of personalized political communication where *people* function as media, as channels for messages. Recognizing this opens up a whole new universe of practices for analysis. Where for instance Fenno's (1978) classic *Home Style* focus on candidate-voter interaction, we need to move on to look at a wide swath of ground war practices as forms of political communication. Your interactions with a canvasser at your door could be seen as interpersonal and direct communication between the two of you, but is your relation with the organization that sent her and formulated her pitch any less mediated than if you were subject to a television advertisement? I would suggest that it is simply mediated by an actor rather than by an artifact. As Bruno Latour (2005) has argued, we should not prejudge what actors and artifacts can do—on many occasions, they can replace each other and work in similar ways. The volunteer who calls you from a phone bank may personalize an attempt at political communication in a way that distinguishes it from mass political communication, and is certainly targeted in a different way than a radio spot, but his reading of a preformulated script, his taking you through the steps on his computer screen and entering data about you in some database is no more two-way than the tracking of your reactions to television or online political advertisements. To accept that people can be media, that we are sometimes simply messengers, does not bereave personalized political communication of its value. It only reminds us that mass media are not the only attempts to overcome what John Durham Peters (1998: 7) calls “a permanent kink in our condition”, the existential separation of self and other that

practices of communication operate on. We sometimes spread the word ourselves, reach out to others on others' behalf. People are sometimes media.

As said, neither of these misrepresentations fundamentally undermines the value of Norris' book in terms of what it adds to our understanding of mass political communication. But they do lead her to misrepresent practices of personalized political communication as antiquated, slowly vanishing in the face of evolutionary trends, and as direct, un-mediated. And if one accepts that, it seems reasonable enough that she, like most other political communication researchers, stick to mass political communication and a dash of internet communication too. As said at the outset, she is far from alone in largely omitting personalized political communication—it does not even earn a mention in recent overviews of the field by luminaries like Shanto Iyengar (2001) and Doris Graber (2005). Political communications research has, in short, tended to conflate an empirical category, mass political communication, with an analytical problem, political communications, and rarely stopped to wonder what might be going on beyond television, radio, newspapers, and the internet. This should change. Our ignorance and omission of personalized political communication is particularly important to recognize in the light of the development of campaign practices since the publication of *Virtuous Circle*, campaigns that Norris in her book projected will see further “decline in face-to-face communication” (2000: 179). To examine such speculation, let us turn to the case that she herself argues exemplifies most clearly the trends she has identified—U.S. federal elections.

Personalized political communication in U.S. federal elections

The sheer number of people contacted by the campaigns, the parties, and other organizations involved in elections gives a sense of how pervasive personalized political communication actually is. Figure 1 represents the percentages of respondents who have reported to the American National Election Survey (ANES) that they have been contacted in person by ‘parties or others’ during a given election year. The survey does not differentiate between different (federal, state, local) races, but remains indicative of the general level of activity.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Clearly, personalized political communication has hardly been insignificant in post-WWII U.S. elections. The latest reported number suggests that 43.9% of respondents were contacted by at least one of the parties during the 2004 election cycle. Given the lack of attention and the prediction that such efforts would decline, the percentage is an astonishing high compared to the (in itself substantial) series average of 26.5%. While the percentage contacted was a more moderate 28.1% in the last Presidential election before *A Virtuous Circle* was published, this is still a significant part of the population and the electorate, and a good deal higher than the post-war lows in 1956 (17.3%) and 1990 (19.2%). These figures do not dispute the idea that mass political communication is important, or that U.S. federal elections are heavily mediatized. But they do confirm that personalized political communication is much more than a thing of a ‘pre-modern’ past or

confined to exotic locales like the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries. We need to flesh out our understanding of political communication to accommodate this fact, as we need to take into account that the Democratic Party in 2004 reported it had 225,000 volunteers involved in the campaign, communicating person-to-person on a large scale, and labor unions like AFL-CIO and SEIU added several hundred thousands more—while the Republican Party reported an astonishing 1.4 million volunteers (Barone, 2005).²

And it is not only about people. It is also about money. At a post-election debriefing conference, Bush-Cheney '04 top consultant Matthew Down said that the Republicans had shifted from a 70-30 distribution between 'air war' (advertisements and media handling) and 'ground war' (canvassing, phone banking, and the like) in 2000, to a 50-50 distribution in expenditures in 2004 (Dowd in Jamieson, 2006). Given the total campaign's total budget of about \$350 million dollars, this is a substantial sum.³ On the Democratic side, there is no public data on the party's own effort, but its allies certainly prioritized personalized political communication. America Coming Together (ACT) spend most of its roughly 150 million dollar budget on getting out the vote through targeted canvassing and phone banking, and unions channeled tens of millions of dollars into their effort to get in touch with every union member in the country.

The data on the number of contacts, the amounts of people involved, and the money spend on it by various organizations suggests that personalized political

² Volunteer numbers are generally self-reported by the organizations involved, and hard to verify.

³ The way in which campaigns report their expenditures makes it relatively easy to measure the sums spend on paid media (channeled through media consultants and media bureaus), but not what is dedicated to personalized political communication, which involves many budget lines, including salaries, consultancy, data services, etc, and is usually shared between many different entities involved in coordinated campaign efforts.

communication is much more than a marginal curiosity or the exclusive domain of those who cannot afford advertisements and a ‘spin doctor’. Contrary to what Norris hypothesized, there does *not* seem to be a decline in face-to-face communication in campaigns. Personalized political communication seems to remain central to political communication, and even in the arguably most money- and media-saturated elections in the world, it may be on the rise. When Bennett and Entman (2001: 18) notes the “great irony” that “the growing person-to-person, or point-to-point communications capabilities on the planet [are] not being harnessed systematically”, it may reflect more of an oversight on behalf of the field. Why has the fact that personalized political communication *is* being harnessed been left in the shadow of mass political communication in the academic literature? A look at the origins of the field may provide parts of an answer.

The Origins of Our Ignorance

A return to the post-WWII establishment of political communication research suggests we have inherited our ignorance of personalized political communication. The work done by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and associates in the 1940s and 1950s remains an obligatory point of reference for contemporary political communication research, either as a heritage to embrace or a past to reject. A trilogy of works, *The People’s Choice* (1944, second edition 1948), *Voting* (1954), and *Personal Influence* (1955), all with Lazarsfeld as one of the senior authors, established the core tenets and research model of the ‘media effects’ paradigm that one with only a slight exaggeration could say for several decades basically

was political communication—and much of communications—research. Indeed, Norris’ idea of a ‘virtuous circle’ can be seen as a book-length attempt to vindicate Lazarsfeld’s claim in *Voting* that “it is a credit to the agencies of communication (media and parties) that far more Americans participate in politics than are really interested” (1954: 245). The point here is not to spill ink for or against these books, but to point out that in them, we find the origins of the almost exclusive focus on the empirical category of mass political communication and hence of our ignorance of personalized political communication.

The People’s Choice (1944/1948) is structured, as the subtitle suggests, around the question of ‘how the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign’. This kind of focus on the short-term effects of campaign and media communications on opinions and electoral behavior remain key to political communication research to this day. Like *Voting* and *Personal Influence* after it, the book is based on a study of a particular community, in this case Erie County, Ohio during the Dewey-Roosevelt race of 1940. One arm of the research strategy is a series of surveys with the same respondents, the other, less often discussed and admired than Lazarsfeld’s pioneering work on panel studies (perhaps partly because it appear so pedestrian) the deployment of a field staff of researchers in the community in question to do interviews and explore the local context. *The People’s Choice* is best known for the ideas it presents on the basis of the panel data: because attention is scarce and heavily dependent on partisan predispositions, *activation*, the crystallization of already held beliefs, is the primary effect of political communication, *reinforcement* of existing tendencies the secondary effect, and *conversion*, changes in belief, only the third, rare, and minor effect—all measured in terms of how often they are

reported in the survey data. Subsequent research on mass political communication has often used these conceptualizations, have usually confirmed these results, and they remain central to what has been called the ‘limited effects’ view in communications studies, the view that communication does not as much transform as it reinforces dispositions and enables collective action.

My interest is not in these celebrated conclusions—what is important here is that which is *not* reported in the book, in what is not conceptualized and integrated into further research. My interest is in what Lazarsfeld later, in his introduction to the second edition in 1948, agonizes over having left out—and then continues to ignore for another ten years and two books, as his heirs have ignored it since. My interest is, of course, in how the book deals with practices of personalized political communication. Chapter 8 purports to deal with ‘what the voters were told’ through “the available communications” (1944: 110). And it enumerates them “newspapers, magazines, radio newscasts, speeches, pamphlets, personal conversations”, but then goes on to deal exclusively with newspapers, magazines, and radio. Personal conversations are ignored (but later put center-stage in *Personal Influence*), as are pamphlets, canvassing, and the people and organizations that work with them. Given their own conclusion on the limited effects of mass political communication, the authors are left to rue their omissions—in the preface to the second edition, Lazarsfeld writes “in the present study, face-to-face contacts turned out to be the most important influences stimulating opinion changes. To the worker in a political machine this is probably not surprising, but to the social scientist it is a challenge” (1948: xxv-xxvi). He later adds “toward the end of the interviewing we

learned from our respondents how important the local Republican machine was in influencing the formation of opinion. By that time, however, it was no longer feasible to study the political situation adequately” (1948: xxxix). Given this, it is a good thing that Lazarsfeld got a second chance, in the 1948 study of Elmira, New York during the Truman-Dewey race, that produced the 1954 book *Voting*, and even a third chance in the 1945-1946 Decatur, Illinois study that led to the publication of *Personal Influence* in 1955. How do these books take up Lazarsfeld’s ‘challenge for the social scientist’? How do they deal with personalized political communication?

Each of these books pursues a different maneuver. *Voting* combine a focus on the mass media and increased attention to issues and perceptions in the campaign with studies of the social and political institutions in the community that involve themselves in the campaign—with studies of ground war efforts. The first component remains the heartland of political communication research, and the questions of issues, perceptions, and more generally what Lazarsfeld calls the ‘social psychology of the voting decision’ is today a thriving subfield in political science. But the study of the non-mass media efforts of social and political institutions—of people mobilized and organized as media for communication—largely disappeared, even in the work of the man who lamented its absence from his own 1944 book. The introduction to *Voting* reveals an interesting reinterpretation of what exactly the omissions of *The People’s Choice* were. Whereas the 1948 preface had talked about parties and the like, the introduction to the 1954 book reads like a precursor for *Personal Influence*, as it underlines the need not to look at the efforts of organizations in the community, but to supplement research on mass

communication with attention to “voters influence on one another” (1954: ix), a question that is dealt with in several chapters under the conceptual heading ‘social processes’—parallel to what others call social or interpersonal communication. ‘Social’ (unions, churches, etc) and ‘political’ institutions (the parties) get a chapter each, both written not by the senior authors Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, but by the research assistants who lived in Elmira, John P. Dean and Edward Suchman. The chapter on social institutions is mainly focused on unions, and though it acknowledges that they, like many of the other organizations surveyed, passed out literature about the election, held rallies, registered people, and tried to get out the vote, Dean and Suchman are unimpressed by the “ineffectiveness”, “wrong assumptions”, and “inadequacy” of their effort (1954: 46). Without making it clear that they are thereby suggesting that organizations such as unions can be seen as working in exactly the same mobilizing way as the mass media, as comparable channels for political communication, Dean and Suchman note that their central effect is “to ‘bring out’ the latent tendency of social characteristics and express them in partisanship” (1954: 52). Like with mass political communications, the short-term effect of personalized political communication seems to be activation and reinforcement rather than conversion—but, as we shall see below, it seems to be much more effective in activating people. In dealing with the parties, Dean and Suchman recognize that the party effort, especially the canvass, serves to “maintain contact between the party and the people”, and even to “affect the outcome of the election” (1954: 168). Again, they note that parties (like mass media, though the parallel is again not made explicit) mainly “reinforce and activate ... rather than conver[t]” (1954: 171).

Their judgment on the party effort is merciless. Dean and Suchman find that they are “not effective” (1954: 174), “not particularly successful” (1954: 177). Indeed, their activities are “perfunctory” and those involved are, like the analysts themselves, “less than enthusiastic” (1954: 178). On this basis, Dean and Suchman claim that “the job of informing and persuading the voters has been taken over by the mass media” (1954: 178) and that, as campaign practices and communications “matures” (a formulation that resembles Norris’ modernization trope), politicians will be able to speak “directly” (another term familiar from the discussion above) to the electorate without “intervening organization” (1954: 179).⁴ Interestingly enough, amidst all this speculation, Dean and Suchman report a significant effect of the party canvass that they hardly discuss. They write: “Among those who intended to vote in August before party contact, 89 per cent of those subsequently contacted did so, but 81 per cent of those *not* contacted did so also. And among those who in August did not intend to vote, only 33 per cent of the contactees and 25 per cent of the noncontactees actually did turn up at the polls” (1954: 175). Compared to the generally limited effects of mass political communication reported in the book, these effects of personalized political communication are remarkable, but draw nothing but scorn from Dean and Suchman. And Lazarsfeld, who was in 1948 so interested in these organizations, has little to say about them in the conclusion to the

⁴ Ironically, here, in one of the iconic texts of the limited effects view and the media effects paradigm, we find precisely the kind of argument later critics (Gitlin, 1978) would argue Lazarsfeld and his successors remained blind to, an argument about how the rise of a new set of institutions that may not be particularly powerful in terms of changing people’s opinions or behavior from day to day, may be displacing time-honed institutions and transforming the entire political system, in this case by delivering on the age-old dream of direct communication. I will not deal here with the literature on political communication that explicitly rejects Lazarsfeld’s heritage, but only point out that precisely because such work has been focused on the institutional and structural effects of the mass media that Lazarsfeld concluded had limited effects, it too has tended to ignore personalized political communication, practices that seem peripheral to these debates.

book—he notes simply that they have been “described”, but that they are “seldomly linked systematically to our data” (1954: 301). Indeed—and that remains as true today, more than fifty years later.

Personal Influence (1955) need not even worry about doing this, partly because it is not focused on an election, but primarily because it makes a different move. Famously concerned with, in the words of yet another great subtitle, ‘the part played by people in the flow of mass communication’, it is structured around the sharp distinction between mass media (mediated) and people in their primary groups (interpersonal, social, or direct communication—your pick) that has survived in most communications research since, and in the focus of most political communications research on mass media in particular. *Personal influence* is a study of people as they interact informally in small groups, where individual opinion leaders exercise considerable influence over the choices and behavior of their peers. Now, given that the study was not done during an election campaign, and did not focus on politics, it is no wonder that the ground war does not make an appearance, but interestingly enough, Lazarsfeld is left to rue, for the third introduction in a row, that the part of the study that was meant to deal with the role of ‘pressure groups’ operating in the community never materialized (1955: 9).

Why did Lazarsfeld ignore the signs in his own data that personalized political communication was comparable to mass political communication in its short-term effects? Why did he not deal with the fact that it was, even in uncontested races in places like Erie and Elmira, being harnessed, and that it had a considerable impact that could be crucial in close elections elsewhere? In a sense, one could argue that he was simply an entrepreneur

who identified a niche and analyzed it in ways that were only subsequently turned into a paradigm that came to define a fledgling field of communications as having, if not a clear position in the division of labor between the different social sciences and humanities, at least a distinct area of inquiry—the emerging mass media (Gitlin, 1978). Also, one should add to this that he was writing at a time when books like Harold Gosnell’s *Machine Politics*, V.O. Key’s *Southern Politics*, and Charles E. Merriam’s *The American Party System* were still widely read, with their rich descriptions of how various organizations communicated politics in their communities through personal messengers, precinct captains and the like, how they functioned as, literally, *intermediaries* in different ways. These authors would be no more surprised than Lazarsfeld’s ‘worker in a political machine’ to hear that personalized political communication harnessed by organized groups was important— indeed, while they wrote at length about this, they spilled little ink on the role of the press and emerging mass media like radio. In the 1950s, it was common knowledge that people were media for party politics. With the mass media being so *new*, so ill understood, and at the same time so fascinating, it is perhaps reasonable enough that the founders of political communication research ignored personalized political communication, and left aside interpersonal communication for later generations and for subfields in sociology and psychology. But their stratagem has, as political science has largely abandoned the thick description of political practices (which is today making a comeback in sociology in the work of, for instance, Javier Auyero on Argentine politics (2001, 2007)) turned into an original sin that we have to confront if we are to reclaim the analytical object of political communication and move beyond exclusive focus

on the empirical object of mass communication that was claimed at a conjuncture that is very different from today's, and that may, *pace* the introduction, be of declining relative importance.

What we know about personalized political communication

While it has not been conceptualized as such and placed in relation to the political communication literature, some research does exist in political science, communications, and sociology that can help us build our understanding of personalized political communication. The inclusion of questions about contacts and the like in ANES, together with work on campaign practices (cf. Herrnson, 2004; Monson 2004; Ubertaccio in Green & Coffey, 2007; Semiatin, 2008) and expenditures (cf. Magleby and Patterson, 2006) help us demonstrate that it *happens*. Further work by political scientists Robert Hucksfeldt and John Sprague, and by Adam Gerber and Donald Green documents *who* it reaches and *what* it does. As I will return to below, we remain mostly ignorant of *how* it works.

In their 1995 book *Citizens, Politics, and Social Communication*, Robert Hucksfeldt and John Sprague adopt a research design explicitly modeled on Lazarsfeld's community studies, but push it well beyond their inspiration. Invoking also Key's *Southern Politics* and other contextually sensitive studies of politics in communal settings, they set out to understand the role of social communication in what they call 'systematically biased' local environments during electoral campaigns—in their case the 1984 Mondale-Reagan race. By social communication, they refer to informal and

interpersonal conversation and the like in workplaces, associations, and at home, in private and public—to the other side of the mass/interpersonal dichotomy. They are interested in how messages filter through these networks and influence people’s opinions and electoral behavior. Through a series of interviews and surveys, they map out the social structure and the patterns of exposure and proximity in the local communal communications environment in South Bend, Indiana. They highlight the influence of how people self-select friends in associations, workplaces, and elsewhere in ways that correlates with their political stance. Of particular interest here is, of course, how deliberate organizational efforts at personalized political communication play out in their case. As said, Huckfeldt and Sprague maintain as their main focus social communication—parallel to Lazarsfeld’s ‘social processes’—and these practices are understood as distinct from mass communication. While they do recognize systematic efforts to work *on* these patterns, they retain the old dichotomy inherited from Lazarsfeld. But with the category of personalized political communication in mind, we can tease a lot of important and more specific information out of the South Bend study—information that Huckfeldt and Sprague themselves, echoing Lazarsfeld’s 1948 recriminations, gesture at in their assertion that “the role and power of politics and political organization are frequently undervalued” (1995: 21). Their data, like that of Lazarsfeld before, suggests that partisan organizations actually are quite effective at political mobilization, and they furthermore argue that they deliberately disseminate messages by exploiting existing social ties and individual citizen’s informal (interpersonal, or social) communication. It is on the question of how this happens that Huckfeldt and Sprague are both the most informative and most obscure.

They are informative because their detailed survey and sensibility to the potential importance of partisan efforts provides a much richer discussion of, and much more data on, *who* parties and partisans reach. They give us data on the percentages of people contacted in person (about a third of those surveyed, somewhat higher than the 23.7% national average ANES number for the 1984 election they deal with). They break it down along partisan lines (each party reached about a third of their own primary voters, 25% of those who did not vote in any primary, and 15-20% of those who voted in the opposing party's primary). These figures substantiate the sense one gets from consultants and volunteers involved in canvassing and the like, that the ground war is oriented towards mobilizing sympathizers. But Huckfeldt and Sprague's results are also obscure on this point because their orientation towards the category of social communication, this informal flow, makes it hard to isolate more systematic efforts that the authors themselves argue are not simply a by-product of social structure, but have logics of their own (1995: 242-243). There is a question we need to think about in terms of personalized political communication—if party and campaign efforts are limited *neither* to mass media nor to partisans chattering along the lines of existing patterns of interpersonal communication, how do they then operate?

Alan Gerber and Donald Green have, with various collaborators, done the best job so far at isolating the effect of personalized political communication, at identifying *what* such efforts actually do (cf. Green & Gerber, 2008 for an overview). In a series of field experiments, they have measured and compared the short-term impact of various practices such as canvassing, phone banking, and direct mail on voter turnout. Their basic

question is simple: what are the most cost-effective ways of getting out the vote? Their antagonists are clear: untested received wisdom and inherited myths in campaigns and elsewhere. Their results are fascinating. Using paid canvassers with no pre-existing ties to the neighborhoods they hit, they demonstrate stable increases in turnouts to the tune of about 8%—a figure eerily close to the one reported in 1954 in *Voting*. Their initial results from commercial phone banks were negligible, but later research suggests that personal phone calls may increase turnout by 3%. Given the fact that both canvassers and phoners were strangers, the results cannot be attributed to the environment that Huckfeldt and Sprague included in their discussion. They are the product of something political communication has not had a category for, something else than mass or interpersonal communication. And Green and Gerber are careful to isolate a long list of other potential factors too, such as race, class, voting history, and even the actual script delivered by phone or at the door. We are dealing with personalized political communication pure and simple. And, echoing results from studies of the impact of personal contacts in, for instance, blood donor drives and recycling campaigns (Jason et al, 1984, Wang and Katzew 1990), clear effects are documented. In their initial publications, Green and Gerber drew attention, as Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) have, to the parallel decline in partisan mobilizational efforts and voter turnout since the 1960s. Echoing points made by for instance Robert Putnam in the civic engagement debate, they even speculate “whether the long-term decay of civic and political organizations has reached such a point that [U.S.] society no longer has the infrastructure to conduct face-to-face canvassing on a large scale” (2000: 662). As the numbers of contacts made, volunteers involved, and

dollars spend reported above suggests, the 2004 elections fairly flatly contradicts this hypothesis. When the parties and organizations involved became aware of the instrumental value of personalized political communication, they mounted a massive effort—and if your phone rang in Ohio in October 2004, or someone knocked on your door, odds were they had a political point to make. In a 2005 article written with Daniel Bergan and Costas Panagopoulos, Gerber and Green compiles data on the campaign to assess its overall impact. They attribute about 4 million out of the total 17 million increase in turnout from 2000 to 2004 to get-out-the-vote efforts (and the rest to population increase and polarization). Their analysis shows not only the asymmetries between the Democratic and the Republican efforts, touched upon above, but also the multitude of organizations involved—from the presidential campaigns themselves, over unions, advocacy and interest groups, temporary 527s, and indeed newcomers like MoveOn. Another question for research on personalized political communication is how all of this was done and coordinated.

While the work of Huckfeldt and Sprague tells us a lot more about *who* are subject to personalized political communication, and Gerber and Green has demonstrated *what* it does in terms of short term impact, we still have little sense of *how* personalized political communication is pursued and organized, how people are mobilized and equipped for it, and how the different organizations involved in it relate to each other—the latter question being particularly complex due to the restrictions on coordination included in the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform act of 2001. These are amongst the many questions opened up by conceiving of the canvasser, the phone banker, the woman with a

leaflet, those who reach millions of people every election cycle, as media for political communication—questions we know well from the study of mass political communication. What are the effects (both short term and in term of what the very existence of particular communicative infrastructures bring about), how are they assembled and maintained, when do they break apart, what is their internal life like, who do they target, and how do those at the receiving end feel about the whole thing? But these are research questions, and will not be subject to speculation here—instead, the concluding discussion will be dedicated to fleshing out what implications the addition of the category of personalized political communication might mean for our general understanding of political communication.

Conclusion

Even at a conceptual level, before the category of personalized political communication has served to guide actual additional research, accepting people as media adds something to our understanding of political communication. It reminds us of all the people we have left out—the volunteers, activists, and operatives that we have simply not cared about. Let us take a first, second, and third look at them—and at others pursuing personalized communication in systematic and premeditated ways, those who proselytize, those who do word-of-mouth PR, those in pursuit of ‘viral marketing’, all beyond politics. We can certainly maintain most of the central findings of the existing literature, but let me here sketch out what I believe we learn if we overcome our ignorance, get rid of the misrepresentations I have argued are produced by modernization tropes and the

dichotomies between mass and interpersonal communication, between mediated and direct communication, problems that plague otherwise excellent work such as that of Pippa Norris—problems I have argued are inherited from the work of Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his collaborators. What will we learn if we accept personalized political communication as one of several categories of political communication and try to reclaim the ground war as a research problem as it has been dealt with in the work of previous generations of scholars such as Gosnell, Key, and Merriam, and is today taken by people like Huckfeldt and Sprague, Green and Gerber, and Auyero?

The central value is that it will give us a way of understanding the role of the millions of contacts, volunteers, and dollars involved in the ground war, and this, combined with the knowledge—*pace* both Lazarsfeld and Green and Gerber—that most of this effort is oriented towards getting out the vote force us to rethink the relation between political communication—as a *full* range of practices, not only as mass mediated—and civic engagement. Norris builds her argument in explicit opposition to what she calls ‘media malaise’ accounts that claim that political communication is partly to blame for whatever decline in civic engagement may have taken place in the U.S. after World War II. But in a series of books that coincide with or even predate Robert Putnam’s initial 1995 articulation of his ‘Bowling Alone’ argument, that civic engagement is eroding in the U.S., partly due to the spread of television, a host of the most esteemed political communication professors around have warned, in the very titles of their books, against *Democracy without Citizens* (Entman, 1989), a *Crisis of Public Communications* (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), and *The Vanishing Voter* (Patterson, 2003). Political

communication, understood exclusively through the lens of the empirical object of *mass* political communication—has been seen as, in the title of another book by Thomas Patterson (1993), *Out of Order*. Now, if we take into account canvassing and the like as *personalized* political communication, we have to reconsider this scenario and think about the tensions between potentially pacifying ‘air wars’ and potentially mobilizing ‘ground wars’. Political communication may not be so unconditionally bad for popular political participation as we had imagined. And if we are to avoid producing an academic discourse that is unnecessarily as devoid of collective action frames as we often find the mass media are, we need to consider additional evidence from other forms of political communication, not simply wallow in deep and abiding disappointment over television.

This does not mean that personalized political communication is somehow ‘good’ whereas mass political communication is ‘bad’. Each can be in and out of order in different ways. Both old (Gosnell) and new (Auyero) research on the actual workings of the practices I include here as personalized political communication suggests that they are fraught with their own problems. The work of Theda Skocpol (2003) on the institutional origins of civic engagement should encourage us to thread carefully. She has argued that the transformation of U.S. civic life in the 20th century was driven by self-interested elites abandoning popular organizations they no longer thought served their interests.⁵ In the

⁵ Interestingly enough, Skocpol, like many writing about the changes in political parties in Europe since the 19650s, entertains the idea that part of the reason for the change was the emergence of mass media that allowed elites to communicate directly with citizens, *sans* what Dean and Suchman in voting called intervening organization. I doubt those who have to deal with pundits and journalists, who have to raise money for just that one more expensive 30 second television spot think they are communicating ‘directly’ with very many. They seem to have shifted emphasis from one attempt to deal with the problem of communication, the party organization, to another, the institutionalized and externalized mass media organization. Clearly, political communication has more to add to this discussion.

light of the scenario of a future of less effective mass political communication sketched out in the introduction, it is not hard to imagine that elite interests also drives the resurgence of mobilization and personalized political communication in recent election cycles in the U.S.. Subject to the imperative of communication, political elites, like advertisers, seem to be flailing around for something that *works*. Thus, recognizing canvassing and the like as a form of political communication is only the first step—further research has to reveal how it, in its various incarnations, is organized, structured, put into play, in the U.S. and elsewhere—what concrete ramifications it has under specific circumstances. Like with mass communication, it will probably turn out to work in many different ways, and be subject to competing moral evaluations. No matter what, it will at least suggest we should rehabilitate the oft-maligned activist leafleting often unwilling audiences on the street—while the addition of the category of personalized political communication certainly does not suggest that those excluded from or marginalized in the mass media has nothing to fear but the fear of ‘the media’ itself, at least it reminds us that *there is another way*—and that it matters.

FIGURE 1

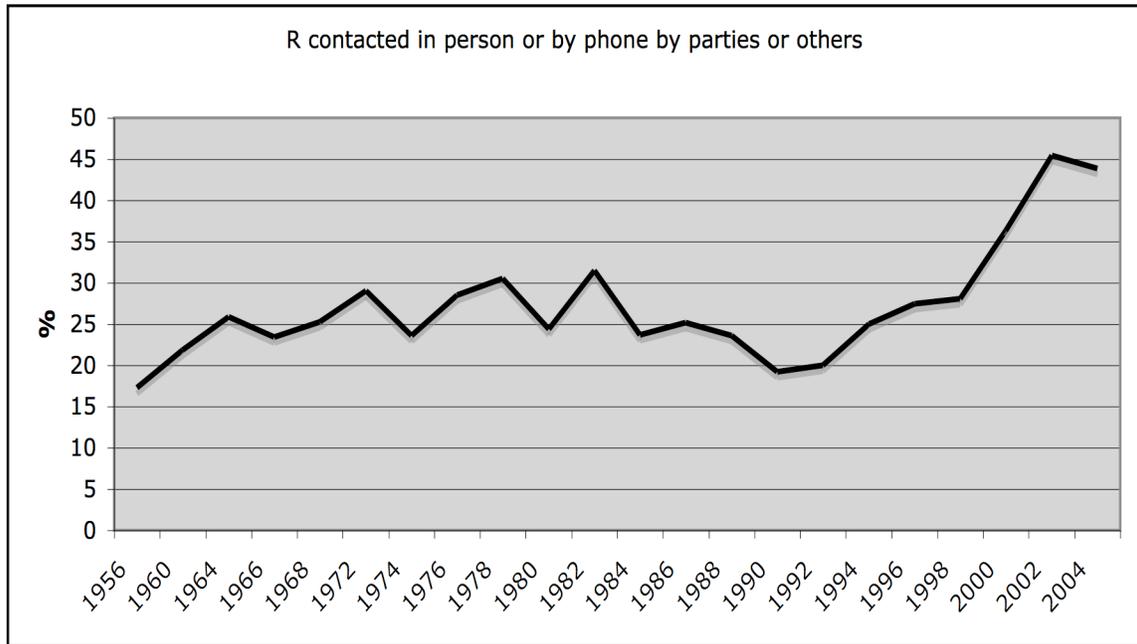


Figure 1. Based on ANES, question VCF9030, 'R contacted in person or by phone by parties or others'. I have been unable to find data differentiating between personal calls and robocalls.

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