



## The return of the ward heeler: [National Edition]

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### Abstract (summary)

Now we are entering a new era in which the mass media will increasingly be supplemented by individually targeted messages delivered by direct mail, e-mail, telephone and fax. The new paradigmatic figure is the database manager, whose massive computer files reincarnate on a grand scale the index cards of the old ward heeler.

In the Canadian Alliance leadership race, the pivotal moment in each campaign was the acquisition of the database of past and present party members. Using the database, the campaigns could send letters to current members asking for financial contributions and voting support, and to past members asking them to rejoin. They could also set up phone banks organized around a predictive dialer for the arduous task of "Voter ID" -- calling every number in the database to inquire which candidate the householder supports. Another part of the telephone equation is the "get out the vote" (GOTV) exercise -- calling all your identified supporters to make sure they remember to vote.

Within a few years, anyone seriously interested in running for Parliament or a provincial legislature will need to build a database of all voters in the riding. Candidates will have to start long before the official writ period in order to ID their potential supporters and find out what their particular concerns are. Persuasion through mail, telephone, and e-mail will swing into high gear during the relatively short writ period, culminating in the GOTV effort to remind people to vote.

### Full Text

Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary and manager of Stephen Harper's campaign for the leadership of the Canadian Alliance.

A hundred years ago, political machines dominated North America. Local bosses and ward heelers knew and rewarded their voters personally with contracts, jobs and Christmas turkeys. To most people, the prime minister or president was a remote figure glimpsed once in a lifetime when he came through town on a whistle stop tour.

The reforms of the Progressive era -- a merit civil service, primary elections, open nominating conventions and votes for women -- loosened the dominance of the machines, but an even greater change came with the rise of television after the Second World War. Suddenly it was the media age. Voters who could see party leaders every night on television began to feel that they knew them directly, rendering the local bosses and ward heelers much less important as intermediaries.

The pollster, ad man and spin doctor became central figures in politics because, by working together, they could manage the leader's image in the media. The "ground war" of personal contact became less important than the "air war" of conflicting ads and sound bites played out in the electronic media.

Now we are entering a new era in which the mass media will increasingly be supplemented by individually targeted messages delivered by direct mail, e-mail, telephone and fax. The new paradigmatic figure is the database manager, whose massive computer files reincarnate on a grand scale the index cards of the old ward heeler.

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At this point, e-mail is still of limited utility because not everyone has an account and those who do have them change addresses frequently. Nonetheless, because it is virtually costless, it is a vital way of disseminating information. In particular, e-mail can send supporters news reports or newspaper columns before they go stale.

The campaigns in the Alliance leadership race were only scratching the surface potential of the technology by using direct mail, e-mail and telephone for Voter ID and GOTV. By starting early enough, it would be possible to build much more information into the database, including demographic factors such as age, occupation, marital status, as well as personal opinions about specific issues.

The possibilities for campaign narrowcasting are exhilarating. No longer will a candidate be limited to broadcasting a one-size-fits-all message. Think of being able to send a detailed description of health-care policy to all the nurses, doctors, and other health professionals in the database, or an autodialed message in the leader's voice dealing with military procurement to all who say they are concerned about the state of the Armed Forces.

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people to vote.

Just as the mass media overlaid but did not replace posters and brochures, targeted communications linked to the database will overlay but not replace the mass media. But there will be a perceptible shift in the feel of campaigns. Candidates will use computer technology to keep track of enormous amounts of data about their voters, while voters will get used to being treated as individuals, not just as members of a viewing audience.

Is it the return of the ward heeler? Not exactly. Because the numbers in modern politics are so huge, political operatives will not really be able to know the needs and preferences of individual voters the way old-style bosses did. But the computer will know and will spit out the messages on command. Maybe you won't get a Christmas turkey from the local boss, but there will be lots of letters and phone conversations to fill up your days and nights!

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