

# Of the *People*, By the *People*, For the *People*

By Jerry Cammarata

Political professionals in New York and the rest of the country will spend the next two years analyzing the fall of Al D'Amato, New York's Senator who went down to stunning defeat at the hands of Congressman Chuck Schumer this year.

They will cite D'Amato's chairmanship of the Whitewater investigation, his amusing gaffes, third-term exhaustion, the backlash against negative campaigns, and so on.

What few have talked about so far, though, is this: in the last 48 hours before Election Day, and in fact right through the day until the 9 p.m. closure of the polls, New York Democrats made almost two and a half million telephone calls to get out the vote.

In a campaign that had virtually no old-fashioned forms of contact between voters and the candidates -- no mailers, no flyers, no buttons or bumper stickers -- and where unimaginable millions were spent on television spots, the margin of victory seems to have been provided by one real, live person talking to another over the telephone.

Once upon a time, all campaigns were run that way. High school kids (often seeking extra credit in their civics classes), senior citizens who were truly the grand old ladies and gents of their parties, union shops stewards and Chamber of Commerce moguls went door to door stuffing all manner of campaign gadgetry right into voters' hands: I can recall in my own home town getting cards that turned into sponges when you dipped them in water, back-scratchers with plastic fingers, key chains, coffee mugs, pens and pencils, all with candidate's names printed on them. The trinkets were important little giveaways (you never forgot the name of the guy who handed out the magic sponges!), but more important was the personal contact with the district captains and campaign volunteers who made the candidate, even if you never met him or her, seem more real and less like a character from television.

Campaigns today are becoming high-tech operations. In New York, for instance, both Schumer and D'Amato (and the half-dozen other candidates on "Green Party" and "Marijuana Reform Party" and other such lines) had their own Internet pages, and often pages on non-partisan voter information web sites. D'Amato not only produced television ads, but had a range of varieties of each commercial to pick

from so he could target the audience of each cable system or local station. Reporters were buried under blizzards of faxes from both camps, and press coordinators for both men were very aware of every electronic journalist's deadlines.

That's all part of the burgeoning Information Age tactics of modern politics, of course, but television sets don't vote, people do. A room full of blue-haired ladies stuffing envelopes may only be interesting as a quaint bit of retro-fashion for the hotshots captaining modern campaigns, but what they shouldn't forget is that every one of those ladies votes, and she has a husband, and a son and a daughter, and five grandkids, and a dozen other ladies just like her in her canasta club, and...well...you get the picture. She has emotional connections to all these people, and they all have connections with her, and the fact that Aunt Sally is working for that nice Ms. So-and-so who's running for Congress has a lot more impact on a whole range of voters than a 30-second spot about budget reform.

In short, human networks can be far more effective in influencing voters than television networks, which is why campaigns should still be about people rather than about fancy graphics.

The person-to-person approach has other benefits too. In the long run, it builds a network of people who get enthusiastic about a candidate or party. Local organizations used to be the bedrock of the parties, and the national party structure was there to stand atop this fundamental layer. Nowadays, it seems like the national leaders treat the party's membership like subscription organizations — just sit at home, send in checks, and read the magazine each month, and let us do the rest. That doesn't build a long-term loyalty from the party faithful, nor does it develop the energy in the ranks necessary for big turnouts in critical elections.

There is also, dare I say it, a human benefit to all of this. Some high school kid getting excited about his or her candidate is getting a taste of what the democratic culture of the republic is all about. They say you always remember your first time, and if that first time means being part of a "movement" for the good of the community or the nation when you're a bright-eyed teenager, rather than just being solicited for a check as a middle-aged high-roller, the emotional attachment to the beauty of free elections is that much greater. At the other end of life, such political involvement is deeply meaningful to senior citizens. At a time in their lives when few people ask their opinions about anything, when they may be more dependent on their families or feel their influence as consumers slipping, being recognized for their value as political volunteers and campaigners can remind the rest of us of the honor we owe to them, and help remind them of how much they still have to offer.

In short, to the man or woman who goes down to campaign headquarters a couple of nights a week, the candidate ceases to be a candidate, and becomes my candidate; the government ceases to be the government, and becomes my government.

People-oriented campaigning a sure way to win, and keep winning, and it's not a bad legacy to leave behind, even if you lose.