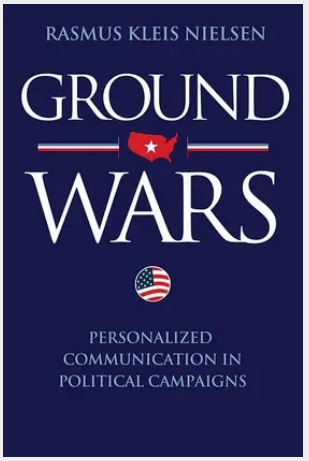
Nielsen

Ground Wars

Personalized Communication in Political Campaigns



Political campaigns today are won or lost in the so-called ground war--the strategic deployment of teams of staffers, volunteers, and paid part-timers who work the phones and canvass block by block, house by house, voter by voter. Ground Wars provides an in-depth ethnographic portrait of two such campaigns, New Jersey Democrat Linda Stender's and that of Democratic Congressman Jim Himes of Connecticut, who both ran for Congress in 2008. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen examines how American political operatives use "personalized political communication" to engage with the electorate, and weighs the implications of ground war tactics for how we understand political campaigns and what it means to participate in them. He shows how ground wars are waged using resources well beyond those of a given candidate and their staff. These include allied interest groups and civic associations, party-provided technical infrastructures that utilize large databases with detailed individual-level information for targeting voters, and armies of dedicated volunteers and paid part-timers. Nielsen challenges the notion that political communication in America must be tightly scripted, controlled, and conducted by a select coterie of professionals. Yet he also quashes the romantic idea that canvassing is a purer form of grassroots politics. In today's political ground wars, Nielsen demonstrates, even the most ordinary-seeming volunteer knocking at your door is backed up by high-tech targeting technologies and party expertise. Ground Wars reveals how personalized political communication is profoundly influencing electoral outcomes and transforming American democracy.

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