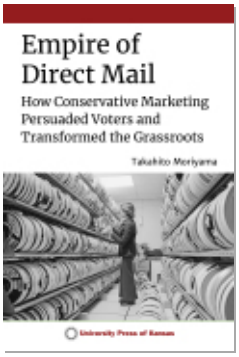
# Introduction

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# Introduction

In fall 1978, richard Viguerie invited a reporter to his office in Falls Church, Virginia. Viguerie rented three floors in a modern office building in the sprawling suburb of Washington, DC, where three hundred employees worked in the Richard A. Viguerie Company (RAVCO). One of the floors had a computer room guarded by two security systems. The room contained two giant IBM computers, two high-speed printers, and ten tape units for distributing millions of letters. An adjoining room, which was protected by even more elaborate security precautions that changed a combination lock every few days, stored three thousand rolls of magnetic tape that recorded the names and addresses of approximately fifteen million people who had been identified as likely donors to conservative causes. Grinning and pointing to the round cans of tape, Viguerie told the reporter, "If you're conservative, your name should be in there somewhere."[1]

The RAVCO was a consulting firm that engaged in political advertising and fundraising primarily for conservatism. Drawing on a huge database of personal information, Viguerie sent out computerized direct mailings from his office in north Virginia to conservatives around the nation. His appeals urged Americans to join battles revolving around single issues such as the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, gun control, school busing, labor law reform, and the Panama Canal treaties. In election years, Viguerie's solicitation letters also called on recipients to support right-wing candidates including Senators Jesse Helms of North Carolina, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, and Alabama Governor George Wallace. Millions of citizens received letters with a simulating personal touch, and hundreds of thousands of them sent back $10, $15, or $25 checks in response to Viguerie's letters. Grossing over $15 million a year, the RAVCO raised money to help conservative candidates and organizations in the late 1970s. The ten IBM magnetic tape units in Viguerie's office incessantly spun, adding new names, deleting others, and selecting those who would be responsive to future campaigns. The room with magnetic tapes was the nerve center of Viguerie's direct mail empire. He claimed that it was "the most important room in America for conservatism."[2]

Beginning in the early 1950s, conservative media activists like Viguerie propagated their antiliberal discourse through various media outlets. Along with right-wing intellectuals, White southerners, the Sunbelt's "suburban warriors," blue-collar workers, and conservative televangelists, these media professionals forged the conservative movement over the second half of the twentieth century. However, unlike grassroots activists who canvassed from door to door or prominent politicians who moved audiences in speeches, conservative advertisers mobilized people and lobbied lawmakers by sending messages from their offices in New York and Washington. This is a story of direct mail specialists who constructed conservative networks and created a new grassroots activism in twentieth-century American politics.

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The impact of political direct mail, which is overshadowed by mass media such as the press and broadcasting, has been understudied thus far. Newspapers and magazines remained crucial in providing information throughout the twentieth century. Radio became increasingly popular among Americans and conveyed political messages by the 1930s. Later by the early 1950s when many households purchased television sets, political campaigners began to use television as a key medium in elections. Academic researchers have examined the effects of media in modern American politics with attention first and foremost to television.[3] Similarly, when it comes to conservative media, mass media always rivets much attention. When analyzing the role of right-wing media activists, researchers have addressed largely conservative publishers, talk radio hosts, and news anchors. Although scholars of right-wing media have dealt with various communication tools in politics, they accept a conventional wisdom that the press and broadcasting played central roles in the United States over the course of the late twentieth century, and more generally, that mass media was the main topic for political information campaigns.[4]

Computerized direct mail is a unique communications technology. The idea of direct mail was based on "personalization" and "selectivity," which derived from an advertising strategy called direct marketing that developed in the midcentury. Direct mail differed from broadcasting in that, instead of circulating the same information to the masses, it enabled campaigners to send personalized messages according to individual preferences. By selecting out likely customers and supporters, then focusing solicitation exclusively on them, direct mail could get messages to people more effectively than traditional media. The evolution of computer technology further transformed the outdated method

of writing letters toward a sophisticated communication technique. As machines recorded a huge body of personal information, including magazine subscriptions and campaign donations, activists could discover prospective backers and carve out political niches more easily than before. Furthermore, whereas radio and television were regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, political direct mailings reached readers without being censored by officials, editors, or precinct leaders. In short, direct mail was distinctive from standardized broadcasting in mass society; it was a medium to connect grassroots individuals directly with the leadership in political campaigns and social movements.[5]

Political direct mail was particularly significant for the development of modern American conservatism. When antiliberal activists and intellectuals began to appear in the United States during the postwar era, they found themselves on the outskirts of the society. At that time, conservative voices were seldom heard as the great majority of Americans were satisfied with New Deal liberalism. The New Deal coalition was firmly established, the White House was held by Democrats or moderate Republicans like Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Court endorsed racial integration, and above all, the national mass media was dominantly liberal, leaving almost no political and cultural room for dissents of liberalism. Under these circumstances, direct mail provided conservatives with channels to gain support from and reach out to potential backers around the nation. By the 1980s, direct mail operatives helped build conservative coalitions by financing right-wing organizations and taking the initiative in crafting a political agenda. As a result, they also transformed the Republican Party from the party of moderates toward that of conservatives over the years.

The political importance of direct marketing was never confined to the conservative movement as liberals mobilized voters in newer but similar ways during the 1990s and beyond. Nowadays, marketing tactics have become the nuts and bolts of political campaigns by helping raise money, reach out to the electorate, and make good images of candidates, thus many people are recently talking about political consultants who are involved with "data mining," "microtargeting," "advertising," "branding," and other undertakings. Democrats and Republicans alike obviously benefit from these political marketing methods as, for example, Howard Dean and Barack Obama who successfully tapped the great number of individual contributions for their campaigns in the late 1990s and 2000s.[6] More recently, after Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, media at home and abroad covered the scandal of Cambridge Analytica, a consultant firm that reportedly acquired personal data from Facebook and influenced American

voters. Therefore, we are likely to fasten on the rise of the internet in politics at the turn toward the twenty-first century without fully examining the development of direct mail politics back in the mid-twentieth century.[7]

This book systematically and critically explores the origins of big data politics by investigating how conservative direct mail emerged and how it influenced the rightward turn of the Republican Party from the 1950s through the 1970s. Moderate Republicans seized control of the GOP, and conservatives repeatedly failed to take over the party during the 1950s and 1960s. However, whereas more conservatives and Dixiecrats moved into the Republican Party in the late 1960s, right-wing media operatives called on Sunbelt suburbanites, working-class White people, and the Religious Right to endorse the party, ultimately reorganizing the GOP as an alignment of diverse White voters who emphasized private enterprise, social issues, racism, and patriotism. The metamorphosis took place partly due to successful campaigns of individual targeting media, through which political marketers collated and analyzed personal data and effectively sent political messages to voters beginning in the post–World War II period. Through examining the development of political media and the changes of political situation, this research inspects why conservatives and Republicans took advantage of direct mail politics more successfully than Democrats.

In addition to the transfiguration of political parties, computerized direct mail had a profound impact on the grassroots by affecting how ordinary Americans participated in politics. When people received solicitation letters, they did not just send back checks. Many letters housed in archives and libraries indicate that the grassroots who responded to direct mailings were never passive contributors, but active participants with their own voice. The number of conservatives gave financial and moral support to conservative campaigns by expressing who they were and why they endorsed the movement, while others sometimes refuted messages of direct mail even if they shared the antiliberal cause. These letters from rank-and-file conservatives demonstrate that political fragmentation was applicable not merely to the relationship between liberals and conservatives, but also to the conservative movement itself. But at the same time, those reactions from the grassroots suggest how direct mail successfully built up loosely connected networks of conservatism encompassing diverse political beliefs, which contributed to the 1980 Reagan Revolution. Far from being isolated and passive individuals, grassroots conservatives and right-wing messengers forged their movement in a different way from face-to-face relations and organization-based engagement.

Of course, many historians have delved into grassroots conservatives, describing vividly the enthusiasm of suburbanites in the Sunbelt, such as Orange

County, California, who built the conservative movement from the bottom up. The women and men in the modern suburbs participated in anticommunist groups like the John Birch Society, erected conservative bookstores around the area, and, as "kitchen-table" activists, enthusiastically supported Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election. Orange Countians also became zealous members of conservative megachurches, heralding the rise of the Religious Right at the national level beginning in the 1970s. By investigating these ordinary people discontent with liberalism, historians have disclosed how conservatism that emanated from neighborhoods and communities ended up turning national politics rightward.[8]

At the same time, direct mail opened up a new kind of grassroots activism. First, direct mail transformed a long-standing pattern of political contribution. By the early 1960s, campaign funds relied heavily on big money from a few of philanthropists and giant corporations. Yet direct mail made it possible for activists and organizations to amass small funds from a great number of individuals. Second, millions of small funds changed the organizational model of the social movements. Traditionally, movement organizations depended on membership fees for their finances, but the late 1960s witnessed the emergence of political groups that held fewer members and instead gained funds by means of direct mail. In a sense, sending small funds was a grassroots participation as ordinary people supported groups and candidates who shared a political cause. Yet simultaneously, direct mail politics offered political involvement without organizational membership or community engagement. While civil rights activists took to the streets and the New Left called for participatory democracy over the course of the sixties, conservative direct mail invented a distinctive meaning of the grassroots. It was *individualized grassroots*, which transformed grassroots mobilization from the building of face-to-face relationships toward the gathering of small involvements.

Direct mail effectively generated responses from individuals who had been unlikely to endorse conservatism. From the 1950s on, conservative consultants gradually undermined the New Deal coalition by sending out messages to people such as Democrats frustrated by the growing activist state, Republican supporters in the Solid South, religious minorities including Catholic and Jewish Americans, and finally working-class White people who felt isolated within the Democratic Party. New followers of conservatism were individuals who switched their political identity from Democrats to Republicans, despite the fact that their region, ethnicity, and class had conventionally been bases of liberalism. By contacting those grassroots supporters, direct mail specialists helped push for political realignment after the late 1960s. However, instead of establishing a

new political party or national organization that courted the whole supporters, 1970s right-wing activists loosely linked diverse interests and focused on ad hoc political issues that could be shared by various groups. Indeed, tightly knit membership groups, such as the Birchers in the 1960s and the church-based Religious Right in the 1970s, remained active over the years. But direct mail certainly provided a new model of grassroots mobilization by segmenting individual voters and reorganizing them into a political movement.

This book also demonstrates that such individualized grassroots mobilization placed emotion in the foreground of conservative politics. In general, conservatism was frequently regarded as an irrational movement closely connected with angry emotion. In the aftermath of McCarthyism, the "consensus" scholars such as Daniel Bell and Richard Hofstadter observed the rise of the radical right in American society, explaining that the political phenomenon derived largely from psychological distress. Bell wrote in *The Radical Right* (1963) that conservatism was "the politics of frustration," which motivated those who were not able to comprehend the complexity of a modern society in the twentieth century. Likewise, Hofstadter pointed out the intense emotion and stupendous irrationality of "pseudo-conservatism," that frequently expressed negative emotions including anxiety, resentment, and rancor. Explaining that the psychological distress stemmed from "status anxieties" of those who were anxious over the fragility of their status in an increasingly changing American society, the consensus school took condescending attitudes toward the right-wing movement in which they observed emotion replacing reason.[9]

In particular, emotion characterized conservative direct mail that would accelerate political partisanship. When using direct mail in the midcentury, commercial ad agencies stressed the tradition of personal correspondence not only by conveying the information of products but also by writing intimately and intensifying the reader's emotion. Political media professionals shortly followed suit, turning intimacy into aggression as an effective strategy. Political mail highlighted such feelings as fear, anxiety, and hostility for contrasting "us" and "them" in the political arena. As such, emotional politics sped up political partisanship between Democrats and Republicans, and even among moderates and conservatives within the GOP. Again, Daniel Bell grew concerned that direct mail and political action committees that utilized the technology were breaking up an already fragmented politics, as conservative consultants like Viguerie actively deployed direct mail to attack liberals and moderates.[10] To be sure, political campaigns had always been emotional prior to the rise of direct mail, but the medium set out the systematic use of emotion in US politics. Thus, even

when direct mail came to light, its political role was considered negative because the medium became a symbol of the conservative movement's emotional aspects beginning in the midcentury.

However, unlike what the consensus scholars and other historians asserted, emotional politics of the conservative movement was not necessarily irrational. From the beginning of political direct mail in the postwar years, operatives marshaled the technology by stoking negative emotion among letter recipients because they understood that it was the best way to persuade individuals to take action. Actually, although their messages were often incoherent and misinforming, conservative messengers deployed emotion for their political purposes in practical and competitive ways. Many intellectuals and pundits dismissed the outburst of fury and anxiety in politics as insane, but this study of direct mail will show that it was the result of the reasonable use of sentiment for mobilizing grassroots supporters. Political advertising agencies comprehended that offensive messages would attract attention in the 1950s, and conservative political consultants turned direct mailings ideological to raise more funds during the 1960s; then by the late 1970s, some religious conservatives marshaled emotional outcry as a competent strategy in politics. Although Democrats and liberals tended to stress hopes and ideals in their appeals, conservative activists surpassed their counterparts in direct mail mobilization. Right-wing ideological direct mail proved so competitive that even some liberals imitated conservatives' emotionalism by the 1980s. Thus, emotional politics would go on without right-wing extremists and demagogues because it is a systemic scheme that built on marketing and media strategies deeply rooted in American politics.

To explore the development of direct mail politics since the 1950s, *Empire of Direct Mail* focuses on several activists in New York City and Washington, DC. Yet it does not aim to make the case that these urban areas were as conservative as the Sunbelt.[11] Rather, the objective of this study is to argue that the two cities were significant for conservative direct mail because they were the capitals of media and politics. As the advertising industry developed on Madison Avenue beginning in the early twentieth century, New York attracted many media experts from around the nation. By the 1950s, these media operatives formed close relations with political parties and candidates, mobilizing Americans in other regions by sending messages. Indeed, Boston, Baltimore, and Chicago played key roles in providing media outlets, but New York occupied the center stage for political advertisement in the decades that this book deals with.[12]

Also, direct mail casts new light on the relationship between liberals and conservatives in their polemical politics. Despite vehement antiliberal rhetoric

and hostile words, conservatives' direct mail actually relied on the structure constructed by the federal government and liberals. As the transfiguration of elections promoted the political use of mass media, which was effective but quite expensive, many became worried over the rise of campaign expenses and the issue of money in politics. There were a sequence of debates over campaign finance throughout the 1950s and 1960s. While Democrats tried to reform campaign regulations, conservatives resisted the alteration by claiming that it would violate the freedom of speech. Following the ideological disputes, Democrats amended the Federal Election Campaign Act in 1974 in an attempt to limit the amount of individual donation to candidates. However, this campaign finance reform by liberals ironically ended up boosting direct mail fundraising and catapulting Viguerie to political prominence in the late 1970s.

Through these analyses, this study examines the interplay between liberals and conservatives beyond the "red-blue binaries." Instead of the conservative "ascendancy," the 1960s and 1970s saw the complicated interactions between the two political forces. As modern conservatism accelerated reactionary movements, their anticommunist, antilabor, and antiliberal rhetoric led to intense partisan politics in the late twentieth century. But if one looks beneath the surface of the ideological conflicts, the left and right had in common certain movement cultures and organizational techniques. This book will explore how direct mail politics resulted from a cooptation of various actors, investigating how social movements, political parties, and the federal government caused a variety of changes, which set the stage for conservative media activism.

Chapter 1 surveys the transformation of political elections from the nineteenth century toward the mid-twentieth century. Political machines and party bosses, which played central roles in American political campaigns, were challenged by a series of progressive reforms designed to eradicate political corruption in the early twentieth century. These reforms paved the way for political consultants, the new political elite who introduced advertising techniques into political elections. This chapter also explains why the Republican Party would later surpass its counterpart in direct mail politics. The decline of political machines and the reliance solely on volunteers on the precinct level urged the GOP to build an intimate relationship with Madison Avenue. The Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson campaigns in the presidential elections of 1952 and 1956 showed how new political campaigns replaced old-styled elections over the years. Simultaneously, the chapter investigates how journalists and intellectuals alerted the public as new communications and media professionals loomed large in US politics during the 1950s.

Chapter 2 devotes attention to the rise of direct mail outside of party politics in the midcentury. Along with the modernization of the US postal service and the advance of modern information technologies, commercial advertising agents altered direct mail from an ineffective communication tool toward a sophisticated advertising device in the 1950s. In these years, liberal, anticommunist, and conservative activists set out direct mail fundraising in New York. With shades of political orientations, these fundraisers co-worked to introduce direct mail's functions, such as selectivity, personalization, and intimacy, to political solicitation. Their direct mail fundraising activities demonstrated how the left and right interacted with each other in developing direct mail politics during the 1950s. However, the changing rhetoric of their direct mailings indicated that bipartisanship gradually gave way to partisanship in the latter part of the 1950s when the modern American conservative movement took shape.

Chapter 3 deals with the junction of party politics and grassroots movements, analyzing the first successful direct mail fundraising that the Barry Goldwater campaign implemented in the 1964 presidential election. As liberals dominated the mainstream media at that time, conservatives sought their own media to raise funds and gain support when conservative organizations and activists were involved with the Goldwater movement. Even if the Goldwater campaign resulted in a resounding defeat on Election Day, conservative political consultants in New York revolutionized campaign financing by amassing a remarkable amount of money from small donors. Marshaling the "air war" strategy, conservative fundraisers made a stark contrast to big money politics of the Democratic Party, as well as other right-wing organizations such as the John Birch Society that depended on the membership model of grassroots engagement.

Chapter 4 provides an exposition on the unfolding of direct mail politics from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. Conservative mail fundraising increasingly developed in national elections over the years. But the chapter uncovers direct mail was not limited to conservative politics as moderate Republicans and liberal Democrats actively marshaled the political device. Despite the wide use of direct mail, conservative fundraising was more successful than liberal solicitation because Viguerie and other conservative activists elaborately institutionalized "ideological direct mail," which was intended to emphasize ideological conflict, partisanship, and emotion. The late 1960s also witnessed the reshaping of political consultancy. As political partisanship became more intense, the advertising industry started to withdraw from the political realm. The sea change resulted in the establishment of professional consultants solely for political advertising,

and the central place of political consulting shifted from Madison Avenue toward the Beltway by the end of the decade.

Chapter 5 illuminates a historic irony when liberal campaign finance reforms consolidated the ascendancy of conservative direct mail fundraising in the 1970s. Charging money interests and political corruption of the Nixon administration, Democrats in Congress achieved the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) of 1971 and the Amendment to the FECA of 1974. Yet contribution limits of the campaign reforms benefited conservatives who collected the vast amount of funds from small contributors via direct mail. The chapter traces the process by which the campaign finance reforms took shape by the 1970s, surveying political scandals and congressional debates under three administrations. As television ads dramatically increased campaign expenditures, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson tackled money in politics, then Richard Nixon paradoxically assisted Democrats to pass reform legislation after the Watergate scandal stirred up debates over political corruption. While liberals contended that big money threatened American democracy, conservatives resisted the liberal reform by claiming that it would violate constitutional rights such as the freedom of expression. Despite the partisan disputes, the liberal reform unexpectedly benefited conservatives, and the change of the electoral system paved the way for the conservative victory in 1980.

Chapter 6 revolves around the New Right, a right-wing populist movement that Viguerie was engaged in during the 1970s. The first section of this chapter delves into the leadership, ideology, and media strategies of the New Right, comparing the distinction between 1960s and 1970s conservatives. Although the two generations of conservative activists shared many political issues, the New Right was an elitist movement defined by antielitism. A cadre of movement leaders in Washington coalesced diverse interests, including White southerners, blue-collar workers in the Rust Belt, and conservative Christians, into a "people's movement" against "the establishment" of big government, liberalism, and the big media. But the New Right in the Beltway mobilized conservatives through political advertising rather than organizing local chapters. Direct mail enabled the New Right to form the coalition by reaching out to each group with single issues, such as abortion, gun control, and the Panama Canal treaties. The second portion of the chapter narrows in on the 1976 and 1980 elections, investigating how the New Right assisted conservative candidates in their campaigns and paved the way for Reagan's presidency.

In the largest sense, this study analyzes the transforming nature of American civil society. Since Alexis de Tocqueville wrote his *Democracy in America* during

the 1830s, many observers regarded the United States as a "nation of joiners" who organized voluntary associations to solve social and political problems. However, political scientist Robert Putnam and other intellectuals pointed out the "collapse of American community" after the 1960s when, Putnam claimed, participation in local groups and grassroots activities began to decline. If Putnam's argument found an echo at the end of the twentieth century, what changes took place in American politics during the latter part of the twentieth century? How did media influence ways in which American citizens were involved with politics, and how did liberals and conservatives affect the changes? The history of political direct mail narrates not only why conservatives rose over the years but also how the medium altered grassroots politics in the period between mass media and new media.[13]

In the "age of fracture," political direct mail was of historical significance.[14] Like commercial marketers categorized the market into specific groups of customers, direct mail consultants segmented voters in the process by which they identified stalwarts, sent personalized mailings, and carved out political niches. For the purpose of efficient mobilization, conservative media activists, especially the 1970s New Right, launched emotional messages and developed right-wing populism. In that sense, direct mail accelerated political divisions in the United States. But at the same time, direct mail and other communication devices have offered individuals opportunities for political participation by giving them new ways to express their political stances. The history of direct mail indicates both the possibilities and dangers of our information culture today.