In the 19th century and even in the first half of the 20th century, political campaigns were very personal. The average voter felt that there was a connection between him or her and the candidate — as the remarkable Harris collection of political trinkets and items that political candidates utilized to reach out to individual voters or small groups of voters shows.

Political campaigns began to change in the second half of the 20th century. My first campaign for public office was in 1956 when I ran for circuit attorney of the City of St. Louis. Back then, political campaigns still had the personal touch, but the influence of mass media was beginning to take place.

Yes, there was some television, but not to the extent of today’s massive, media-driven campaigns.

Yes, there were pollsters, but polls were not so frequently taken and not so lavishly relied on as they are today.

Yes, campaign money was important, but not in the staggering amounts of today.

Back then, candidates were eager to meet voters individually, face-to-face, or in small groups. Candidates were eager to speak at all sorts of political and civic clubs. That was then. Today is very different.

It seems now that actually meeting and engaging people is considered a waste of time. A candidate has to spend most of his or her time raising money. The money is then used to hire pollsters and other “experts” who tell the candidate what to say (based on what the polls show). Then another expert who makes the: 30 or: 60 spots talks to the pollster. They create the spots, and the rest of the money is used to buy airtime.
Twenty-first century American politics boils down to money, pollsters, and television. Everything else is vestigial and relatively unimportant. (A full 360-degree circle or raising money to hire the pollster to create the rhetoric to use on the television spot that costs a lot of money is completed.) When I later served in the U.S. Senate, I knew a couple of senators of advanced age who were rather frail. They were successfully re-elected with a few carefully orchestrated personal appearances coupled with massive television campaigns. (And that was in the 1970’s.)

In the 2000 presidential primary, Senator John McCain declared that campaign spending reform was the No. 1 political issue of our time. I totally agree. Reform of the campaign finance laws is a fundamental prerequisite to reducing the cynicism and distrust that characterizes much of our electoral politics today.

I commend Saint Louis University for organizing this important exhibit. I hope it will help remind us of what our politics was once like and what, with campaign finance reform, it can be again.

— Senator Thomas Eagleton