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Sometime in the past five years, the local level campaigns in Irion County changed to letter writing maneuvers instead of door-knocking, face to face affairs. Today's candidates crank out hundreds of letters off a voters' list and rely on smiling at the Post Office to complete their bids. This year was also the first time I noticed yard signs around Mertzon.

The weekly newspaper expanded the campaigning by running profiles on the candidates and publishing their platforms. Country newspapers fill an important civic duty printing the minutes of the school board and the commissioners court meetings. The editor and her reporters do a good job covering the county without interrupting the beauty shop and coffee house coverage of the raw unwashed news about town.

My son, who ranches on his great grandfather's place, claims that in the past 10 years while I have lived at the ranch, my standing has improved over in Mertzon. He thinks moving 22 miles from town, limiting my political activities to voting absentee in the general election, and restricting endorsements to nodding to election judges in primary races has paid off.

An unofficial poll run as recently as 1993 contradicts his opinion. Last year, I backed into the car in front of my office and caused a lot damage to both vehicles. After the shock of the wreck subsided, I had to drive the smashed-up pickup over for the mail and grocery runs.

Before the pickup reached the body shop, 106 citizens stopped and asked how the bed and fenders on the truck were ever going to be repaired. Only one person inquired if I had been injured and was going to be all right.

Mertzon has a wide reputation for charitable, generous and tolerant people. So if those kind-hearted folks rank a 1990 Ford pickup over you in importance, the message is clear, especially if the pickup has only been registered in the county for four years and you have been around for 65.

Another bad sign was that only one candidate asked for my vote in the primary election. The winner of the county judge's race came by twice, even though he knew about the results of the

pickup poll. The second time he was upset because our state representative had endorsed his opponent.

Locals dislike outsiders messing in their politics, so I told him that to teach the congressman a lesson, I'd come out big and heavy for him in the next election and throw 106 votes to his opponent. The would-be judge started looking nervous and glancing out the window at his parked truck. He didn't stay much longer.

I think the guilt by association rule of justice had begun to work on His Honor. As close to election day as it was, he probably considered 10 votes precious, not to mention gambling on losing 106 votes in a 700 or so projected turnout.

The guy who used to be our U.S. Congressman dramatized his defeat to down all comers for the hard loser's award in 1994. He felt so downcast after his loss in the Senate race, he asked President Clinton for an ambassadorship to a small country in Africa that's so wild and uncivilized, they might eat a foreign service agent for the main course of their Founder's Day celebration.

Sure have been big changes in the county. Letter campaigns lack a whole lot of the steam in the old personal contact contests. High feelings over the commissioner and sheriff battles used to go on for years after the races ended. I suppose today if there's a grudge fight, the principal retaliations will be by licking postage stamps and swinging yard signs.

The new judge hasn't been by since his election. Public officials catch on plenty fast to the pitfalls of bad company.