

GROUND GAME

As momentous as the possibility of a perfect 19 game seasons is (Go Pats!! Go hit 'em, thuggish Rodney Roid!), Tuesday's Super is way more momentous than today's, not least because it'll have significant input over whether we send the first woman or the first African-American to the White House, and because either one promises to start our painful recovery from the Bush disaster.

But the story most people are telling is still missing the equivalent of Bill Belichick's pre-game film analysis. Though it has arguably been decisive in all four non-Clusterfuck Democratic contests thus far, few people are talking about ground game. Obama out-performed polls (except one) in Iowa and South Carolina (the latter by an astounding amount); what appeared to make the difference was real grass-roots mobilization—and effective execution—among many who had been largely disaffected in the past. Hillary's win in NH was at least partially her GOTV. And her win in NV can be attributed to a combination of her own ground game and Obama's failure to make the most of union support. Ground game is the story of this election thus far.

Now, there's one big reason why you're not hearing about ground game. The teevee networks, which still largely set the narrative of the election, cannot sell "ground game." They can sell ads that appeal to women or African-American voters, their insider pundits can either rail for or against the Big Dog and provide value to the network that way. But they have no product to sell called "ground game." As a result, it's simply not part of the story.

But it's more than that. Perhaps for this very reason, the media have missed another big story—what has happened to the ground game over the last four years.

When I was at the "No News Is Good News" conference in Boston, one of the participants (I

think I remember who it was, but I'm not positive so he'll remain nameless) said,

If I had to choose between us [the media] picking the President or the County Chair picking the candidate in a smoky room, I know which one I'd pick.

At first, I thought he meant, "I'd pick the one that has the locals expressing the will of the locals, no matter how imperfect the process." But as I thought about it more, I realized he meant the opposite—he believes the smoky rooms of local politics are so flawed, that it's better for a bunch of Village insiders to choose the President than it is for a bunch of locally elected county officers.

As someone who had been, until a few months earlier, a County Vice Chair, I really should have pursued the question and challenged his understanding of what is happening in those smoky rooms. The thing is, he assumed that all County Chairs are undemocratic and they all work in smoky rooms.

Now, I assume that is true in a lot of—perhaps most—places still. But one of the things that I've been seeing happening since 2004 (and granted, this is anecdotal), is that the people have been taking over the smoky rooms and, with them, the local parties. I'm biased, sure. A bunch of us Deaniacs and other progressives worked our tail off in 2004 for a candidate we were less than enthused about and we dramatically increased County turnout—the same kind of dramatic increase that we're seeing now in primary after primary. Then, when County election time came around, a lot of us stuck around in leadership positions in the party; along the way, the County party leadership started to look a lot more like our county's population. In our case, at least, just replacing some of the people who had a very stale conception of how things were supposed to work had an effect—not as much as we'd like it to have, but definitely an effect—on the general

idea of how things were supposed to work. But it's not just my county (which is, admittedly, a ridiculously easy one to work in). I know of people all over Michigan doing the same, usually in places that are a lot more challenging than Washtenaw County. They, too, are enjoying some gradual changes; in some cases, they're effecting dramatic change.

The voters are becoming citizens again.

Which is why, looking forward to Super Tuesday, I'd like to pre-emptively salute the people who are, as we speak, doing work every bit as heroic as Tom Brady and Good Eli Manning will do today: those out there deciding the outcome of Tuesday's election. I don't know how it'll come out, and I'm thrilled that either way, we win. But whoever wins tonight and whoever wins on Tuesday, there's another victory that really deserves some attention.

Update: Jeffrey Feldman talks about the pamphlet tacked to the bulletin board in his building, hitting some of the points I'm trying to make here.