

The Ground War

October 26. Forget about who won, lost, or got the edge in the debates. It's all about who wins the ground war now. It's about who can get their voters registered and, even more importantly, who can get them to the polls. Get organized: "the absence of organization in a single county, in a single town may be fatal." Get out the vote: ". . . canvas every vote, learn the names of the wavering, stimulate the inactive. . . ." ¹ The party with the best ground operation is the one who will win on Election Day.

Now jump ahead a century to 2004. The above are rallying cries from the national parties to their field operatives and supporters *over 100 years ago*. During that time, party organizations were well-oiled, fine-tuned, vote-mobilizing machines. Why did the Gilded Age parties reach unprecedented levels of organizational strength? One reason (as we argue in chapter two): **the closeness of elections put a premium on party organization to get out the vote**—you had to master ground warfare to win competitive races.

The party faithful were ordered to keep track of voters on Election Day, and "if you find that some are not coming . . . have a buggy sent after them. . . . See that every . . . vote is polled!" ² Replace "buggy" with "minivan," and the late nineteenth century call to "Organize! Organize! Organize!" sure resonates in the eleven or so battleground states in 2004.

Just ask any resident of Ohio, Pennsylvania, or Florida. The modern party organization appears to be alive and well and at the front door. Swing state residents are dodging canvassers as they head out for the morning paper at the end of the driveway. They are fielding nonstop phone calls from the Bush and Kerry campaigns and from partisans and pollsters across the country. Their airwaves, TV networks, and computer screens are inundated with political advertisements while their mailboxes are jammed with campaign material.

Don't feel left out if, like most Americans, you hail from a firmly blue or red state and are not receiving the same kind of TLC from the two major parties as your fellow citizens in the magic eleven. The two national party organizations want YOU, no matter where you live. Just this week Bush and Kerry supporters across the country received a new wave of emails from their respective presidential candidates: "President Bush not only needs your vote, he needs your help"; "It's time to turn off the computer, lace up your sneakers and do some old-fashioned on-the-street politics"; "It's going to take hard work and a lot of creativity to get out John Kerry's message, even two hours of your time will have an impact" (Brian Faler, "Bush, Kerry Make Last-Minute Pleas for Help," *Washington Post*, October 19, 2004).

Both campaigns are using their organizational prowess to rally outside support in the swing states. Just enter your zip code on John Kerry's web page to locate a "phone-a-thon to the battleground states" near you or to hook up with other Kerry supporters willing to trek to the nearest swing state (sometimes many hours away) to hand out bumper stickers and canvass neighborhoods. Log in on the Bush web page to "walk the vote" in your own neck of the woods (the Bush-Cheney ticket will send along all necessary materials) or sign up to travel to a swing state to get out the Bush vote—the RNC will assign you a precinct to canvass, pay for your transportation and hotel accommodations, and provide you with a small stipend to boot.

Both national parties claim to have their largest ground operations in history working in full force to bring out the vote in 2004. Historically, however, the Democrats—with the help of traditional allies such as the unions—have held the upper hand in ground wars, proving more adept at getting their supporters to the polls on Election Day. For example, in Ohio in 2000, poll after poll of probable voters showed George Bush leading Al Gore by at least 14 percentage points. When the actual votes were tallied, however, Bush barely won Ohio; his lead had shrunk dramatically to a mere 4 percent. What happened? The Democrats simply out-manned the GOP in ground troops. Polls tally up *expected* voters, but no one can predict who will *actually* show up on Election Day. The Republicans, led by Karl Rove, have spent the last four years trying to eliminate the Democrats' ground warfare advantage by strengthening and expanding the GOP base.

The vote-mobilizing tactics of the two national parties in the 2004 election reflect the differences in each party's organization. The Republicans operate a tightly knit, centralized party organization with orders coming down through the ranks from the top dogs at the RNC headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. The GOP has strengthened its base in 2004 by bringing a traditional Republican ally—evangelical Christians—into the folds of the party organization. In the past, the evangelical base has operated independently of the GOP, primarily through the Christian Coalition, dropping voter guides off at local churches and spearheading their own vote mobilizing drives. The difference in 2004, explains Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition and now Southeast regional coordinator for the Bush-Cheney ticket, is that "the effort to get out the socially conservative faith community has been fully integrated into the presidential campaign" (Alan Cooperman, "Evangelical Leaders Appeal to Followers to Go to Polls," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2004). Four years ago, 4 million evangelical Christians withheld their votes at the last minute upon learning of Bush's DWI late in the campaign. This time around the Bush campaign has been careful to clearly give evangelical Christians due reason to get to the polls. With Bush's firm stand on abortion, gay marriage, and stem cell research, the GOP hopes to mobilize their conservative base in 2004.

The Democrats, on the other hand, have a far more decentralized party organization, relying heavily on outside groups and independent 527s to help register and motivate voters for the Kerry-Edwards ticket. The strongest financially of these Democratic allies is the 527 America Coming Together or ACT. Because of its tax status, ACT cannot coordinate directly with Kerry's campaign, but it is spending \$125 million on voter registration drives and vote mobilization with the sole purpose of getting him elected. ACT pays its workers—some 45,000 strong by Election Day—to get out the anti-Bush vote, enabling many a union member to take leave of their jobs and work for ACT through November 2.

Powerful interest groups are also playing a major role in the 2004 ground war, flanking *both* party organizations in the battleground states. For example, the Democratic party benefits from such groups as the League of Conservation Voters, which has launched a full-blown media campaign in Florida on the havoc off-shore oil drilling would reek on the state's coastline and, consequently, on the Floridian lifeblood: tourism. Another interest group—Environment2004—is running ads in Florida and Wisconsin focusing on rising mercury levels in American rivers and waterways, hoping to garner support for Kerry among women (especially mothers) and all anglers.

The strongest interest group supporting the GOP party organization in the ground war for swing state voters is the NRA. The monthly magazine to NRA members arrives this election season with a personalized note and a list of

candidates endorsed by the organization—candidates with “2nd Amendment credentials” from President Bush down to local politicians. These mailing lists, as well as powerful neighbor-to-neighbor networks, make the NRA a vote-mobilizing force to be reckoned with. Why else do you think John Kerry made sure the national media caught him geese hunting in Ohio last Thursday?

Powerful interest groups and independent 527s have poured more than \$350 million into the 2004 election to get out the vote. But perhaps the greatest weapon in the arsenal of ground warfare in this election just might be internal to the two national party organizations. In 2004, the DNC and RNC have created their own internal secret weapon: Demzilla and VoteVault. These party databases—each with over 165 million entries—go far beyond your basic polling and census info. If you live in a swing state, you can count on being in the databases—from your annual income to what you like to do on the weekends, they have your number. The party operatives are looking for any voting clues they can get their hands on—magazine subscriptions, church directories, feedback from canvasser questionnaires. Is that Cabella’s hunting catalogue in your mailbox for ordering the guns or just the flannel dog beds? Do your kids go to public or private schools? Are you a Walmart shopper, a Starbucks junkie, an eBay addict? Who knows what’s in there (top secret by all accounts). But you can be sure that the ground troops for each party have greater access to individual voter profiles and voting cues than ever before. With Blackberrys and Palm Pilots in hand, the front lines of the two parties are engaging in “ballot chasing,” a new phenomenon where high-tech meets old-fashioned door-to-door politicking.

Finally, the ground troops in both parties are actively pursuing a group you know all too well: the youth vote—split evenly by Gore and Bush four years ago. Problem: young voters are historically not dependable voters—it’s hard to predict how many will show up on Election Day, let alone who they will vote for. In 2000, only 37 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds turned out to vote, compared to 64 percent of the twenty-five-and-up crowd. In an attempt to reverse the thirty-year decline in youth turnout, the nonpartisan New Voters Project (financed primarily by the Pew Charitable Trusts) has spent \$10 million to register young voters in six battleground states. Who succeeds in capturing the youth vote is another story. The Republican National Committee has given \$10 million to College Republicans—30,000 pro-Bush volunteers spreading the GOP word on their respective campuses, while Redeem the Vote—35 Christian rock performers—independently mobilizes young conservatives to go the polls for Bush. The Democrats are relying heavily on outside groups—such as Rock the Vote and VoteMob—to register and mobilize young voters for Kerry.

So with just over a week to go, the pundits are buzzing: Will social conservatives show up for Bush? Who will win the youth vote? Will Bush gain ground among African Americans? Will it be “Viva Bush” or “Unidos con Kerry” for Latino voters? It all really boils down to this big question: Who will be the master of the ground game on November 2? And when it’s all over, political scientists will have to ask: Are strong parties back?

¹ Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 50-51.

² Silbey, *The American Political Nation*, 58.