

Chapter 2

The General Election Campaign



Once they have been nominated, candidates choose their general election campaign strategies based on their perceptions of what the electorate wants, the relative strengths and weaknesses of their opponents and themselves, and their chances of winning. A candidate who is convinced that he has a dependable lead may choose strategies very different from those used by a candidate who believes he is seriously behind. A candidate who believes that an opponent has significant weaknesses is more likely to run an aggressive, attacking campaign than one who does not perceive such weaknesses.

After the 2012 conventions, the race was close. Most observers, and both candidates' organizations, believed that either President Barack Obama or Mitt Romney could win and that the campaign could really make a difference. Chapters 4 through 8 of this book will consider in detail the impact of particular factors (including issues and evaluations of Obama's job performance) on the voters' decisions. This chapter will provide an overview of the campaign—an account of its course and a description of the context within which strategic decisions were made.

THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND CANDIDATES' CHOICES

One aspect of the strategic context that candidates must consider is the track record of the parties in recent presidential elections. In presidential races the past is certainly not entirely prologue, but it is relevant. From this perspective, the picture was slightly more encouraging for the Democrats than for the Republicans. From 1952 through 2008 there had been fifteen presidential elections, and the Republicans had won nine of them. On the other hand, the Democrats had won three of the last five races since 1996, and in 2000 they secured a narrow popular-vote margin despite falling short in the electoral vote.

The nature of the American system for electing presidents requires that we examine the state-by-state pattern of results. U.S. voters do not directly vote for

president or vice president. Rather, they vote for a slate of electors pledged to support a presidential and a vice presidential candidate. Moreover, in every state except Maine and Nebraska, the entire slate of electors that receives the most popular votes is selected. In no state is a majority of the vote required. Since the 1972 election, Maine has used a system in which the plurality-vote winner for the whole state wins two electoral votes. In addition, the plurality-vote winner in each of Maine's two House districts receives that district's single electoral vote. Beginning in 1992, Nebraska allocated its five electoral votes in a similar manner: the statewide plurality-vote winner gained two votes, and each of the state's three congressional districts awarded one vote on a plurality basis.¹

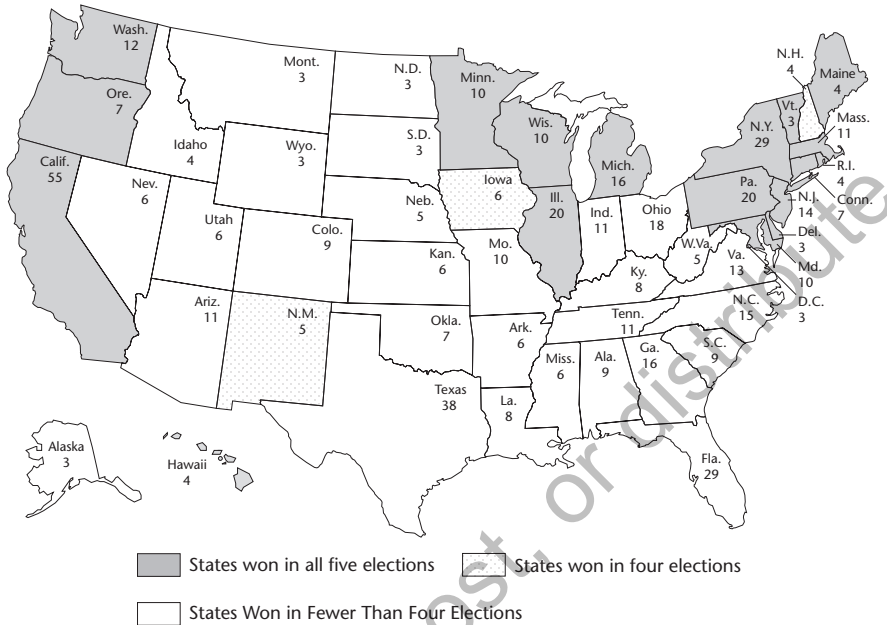
If larger states used the district plan employed by Maine and Nebraska, the dynamics of the campaign would be different. For example, candidates might target specific congressional districts and would probably campaign in all large states, regardless of how well they were doing in the statewide polls. But given the winner-take-all rules employed in forty-eight states and the District of Columbia, candidates cannot safely ignore the pattern of past state results. A state-by-state analysis of the five presidential elections from 1992 through 2008 suggests that the Democrats had reason to be hopeful about the effort to win the 270 electoral votes required for victory in 2012.

As Figure 2-1 reveals, eighteen states plus the District of Columbia voted Democratic in all five of these elections. Only thirteen states were equally loyal to the GOP. (See Chapter 4 on long-term voting patterns.) These consistently loyal states provided a prospective balance of 242 electoral votes for the Democrats to only 102 for the Republicans. Less problematic for the GOP candidates were the next groups of states. Six states voted Republican in every election but one, with a total of 69 electoral votes. Balancing these were only three states with 15 electoral votes that supported the Democrats in four of the five contests. Thus, if each of these states' political leanings were categorized solely on the basis of the last five elections, one might expect that 257 electoral votes were likely to go to the Democrats in 2012, while only 171 were as likely to go to the Republicans, placing Obama 86 votes ahead of Romney and only 13 votes short of the number required to win.

If this past pattern persisted during the 2012 election, the GOP ticket would have been at a serious disadvantage. But, of course, things were not that simple, and many factors made Republican chances considerably better than they looked based on these numbers. Most obviously, they had *won* two of the three previous elections, and the loss in 2008 occurred in the context of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, for which many blamed President Bush and his party. Moreover, the economic recovery was modest and many potential voters were unhappy with the president's performance generally and his stewardship of the economy in particular.

Thus, in the view of most observers, either party could win, and both campaign organizations saw virtually the same set of states determining the outcome. These would be the "battleground" states, where both campaign organizations would

FIGURE 2-1 States That Voted Democratic in at Least Four out of Five Elections, 1992–2008, with Number of Electoral Votes



Source: Compiled by authors.

concentrate the lion's share of their time, money, and effort. Indeed, even before the beginning of 2012 the two parties had already focused their attention on a set of twelve or thirteen states, and most of the other states would be largely ignored until election day.² The larger states in this group—particularly Florida, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania—would be the main focus of their efforts. Many of the non-battleground states, on the other hand—even large ones like California, New York, and Texas—would see little evidence that a presidential campaign was in progress. A state perspective focused on the electoral college would dominate the strategy of the 2012 campaign.³

POLITICAL CONTEXT, OVERALL STRATEGY, AND OPENING MOVES

The strategic choices of candidates and parties are shaped by the particular context of the election. One feature of that context is whether an incumbent is running. Incumbent races are different from contests without incumbents. They tend to unfold in a regular pattern, and the first stage of the pattern centers on the public's attitudes toward the current occupant of the White House. As we will discuss in

detail in Chapter 7, elections involving incumbents tend to be referenda on presidential performance. From 1956 through 2000 (a time when we have dependable measurements of the public's evaluation of the president's performance), there were nine elections in which an incumbent president could stand for reelection. (In three other elections—1960, 1988, and 2000—the incumbent was constitutionally ineligible to run again.) In five of those elections, the president had approval ratings above 50 percent during the spring before the vote—that is, before the general election campaign, and even well before the selection of the opposing nominee by his party's convention. In all five instances, the incumbent won comfortably. On the other hand, the incumbent's approval was below 50 percent in four cases. In all of those instances, he either withdrew from the race or lost.⁴ A tenth incumbent race was 2004, when President George W. Bush sought reelection. Between the beginning of March and the end of July of that year, Bush's approval rating measured by the Gallup poll ranged between 46 and 53 percent.⁵ The outcome was a narrow victory for the incumbent.

These data suggest that Obama's approval rating was an important indicator of his prospects for reelection, and in early 2012 the news was decidedly mixed. Using the same window of March 1–July 31 used for Bush, the approval ratings from twenty-one polls by five major polling agencies ranged from 41 percent to 52 percent, with an average of 48 percent.⁶ Thus the president's standing was right on the historical borderline between victory and defeat, confirming the prospects for a real contest that either major party could potentially win. This moved the race into the second stage of the pattern of incumbent races, in which the public evaluates the opposing candidate and makes a judgment on whether he is a plausible alternative to the incumbent. In years when the incumbent's approval is quite high (e.g., 1956, 1964), the electorate doesn't seriously consider the challenger and the race is effectively over before it begins. Clearly 2012 was not to be one of those cases, and Mitt Romney would have the opportunity to make his case for election.⁷

The Obama campaign's strategic planning started long before 2012. In fact, it began just days after the 2008 victory. A few dozen aides gathered in Chicago to conduct an extensive investigation of the 2008 effort, producing a 538-page report that shaped preparation for the reelection bid.⁸ The staff focused on rallying and turning out Obama supporters on election day. We will consider those efforts later in this chapter. They also planned strategy for countering the Republicans' campaign. Once it was clear that Romney would be the opponent, James Messina (the Obama campaign's manager) proposed an unconventional approach. At a strategy meeting in May 2012, he advocated that the campaign launch an extensive negative ad campaign against Romney. This idea was contrary to accepted practice, which was to start slowly and to emphasize positive messages at the outset. Moreover, since all campaigns have limited resources, this tactic carried considerable risk. Witnesses at the meeting claimed that Messina said: "If it doesn't work, we're not going to have enough money to go have a second theory in the fall."⁹

The president endorsed the plan, and the ad campaign was launched. The negative blitz focused on Romney's business record and personal finances. It put Romney on the defensive, forcing his campaign to counter the Democrats' charges instead of being able to focus on weaknesses in Obama's record. Moreover, because of the demands of his nomination contest, the Romney campaign would be short on money until the GOP convention confirmed his nomination, permitting him to use general-election funds. Republican super PACs, which could spend independently, partially compensated for Romney's money squeeze, but their ads were mostly anti-Obama rather than pro-Romney. The Romney efforts were also helped by a \$20 million dollar loan to the campaign secured by a finance aide and some close advisors to the candidate. However, the ad purchases that these funds permitted were limited compared to those of the opponent.¹⁰ Romney also had to contend with other advantages that accrue to an incumbent. Obama's campaign ran ads at the end of April questioning Romney's likely performance in a national security crisis and attacking him for sending jobs overseas. Then on May 2, the anniversary of the death of Osama bin Laden, the president was in Kabul, Afghanistan, reminding people of his responsibilities as commander-in-chief.¹¹

Recognizing that the economic environment would set the stage for a difficult reelection race, the Obama forces also focused on shaping the electorate through registration and turnout efforts, just as they had in 2008. It was with regard to this aspect of the campaign that the views of Obama's and Romney's campaign advisors differed most. The president and his people believed that they could repeat their advantage of 2008 and produce a group of voters in which Democrats outnumbered both Republicans and independents, and in which minority voters (especially blacks and Latinos) were robustly represented. Republican planners, on the other hand, anticipated that because of the slow economic recovery and public dissatisfaction with other aspects of Obama's performance, the electorate would more resemble that of 2010. They thought that turnout by minorities and younger citizens would disproportionately decline compared to 2008 and that pro-GOP segments like older voters would make up a larger portion of the votes cast.

Given the expectations for a close contest, there was, as we mentioned above, a strong focus on the battleground states during the Democrats' planning. If the president could carry all of the states that John Kerry had in his losing race in 2004, they would provide 246 electoral votes (down from Kerry's 251 due to reapportionment after the 2010 census). Due to the size of this potential bloc of votes, Obama had a number of possible paths to get to the necessary 270.¹² The simplest was Florida. Its 29 votes would provide more than the necessary margin. He had carried it 51 to 48 percent in 2008 and had devoted a good deal of attention to it in the past four years. A second strategy, also oriented toward the South, would be to carry both Virginia and North Carolina, with 28 combined votes. These, too, Obama had won the last time, but his margin in North Carolina was only 0.3 percent, so this course seemed difficult. Also challenging was the

Midwestern plan that sought both Ohio and Iowa, adding 24 votes for a total of exactly 270, because the president had been behind in Ohio polls for much of the previous year. Finally there was the Western scenario. In this one Iowa would be combined with Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico. These states totaled 26 votes and were another set the Democrats had carried in 2008. Of course, the Obama campaign did not have to choose among these plans; they could all be pursued simultaneously. The point was that any one of them, or even partial achievement of two or more, would be enough to win.

For the Romney camp the plan was more general. The Republican candidate and his advisors wanted to make the election a referendum on Obama and his performance. With unemployment hovering above 8 percent of the workforce, the president's approval rating at about 50 percent, and a majority of the public telling pollsters that the country was on the wrong track, the GOP believed that the best course was to criticize the president resolutely for his failures and to paint Romney, with his extensive business experience, as the man who could do better. This plan was basically designed to block Obama's paths to success and potentially to carve off one or more of the former Kerry states (such as Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, or Wisconsin) that seemed like they might potentially be vulnerable.

FROM THE CONVENTIONS TO THE DEBATES

The Conventions and September Events

The two months before election day were bracketed by two hurricanes, Isaac and Sandy. The former struck the Gulf area in late August, forcing postponement or cancellation of the events planned for the first day of the Republican convention in Tampa, Florida. The convention produced a very conservative platform that proposed reshaping Medicare so that those who were covered would receive a fixed amount of money each year to buy their own coverage, and contending that "the unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life that cannot be infringed."¹³ It also said, "We will create humane procedures to encourage illegal aliens to return home voluntarily, while enforcing the law against those who overstay their visas," and it opposed gay marriage and restrictions on guns.¹⁴

Romney's acceptance speech mixed attacks on the president's record with positive elements of his own biography. Regarding Obama he said: "You know that there's something wrong with the kind of job he's done as president when the best feeling you had was the day you voted for him." And Romney contended: "This president can tell us it was someone else's fault. This president can tell us that the next four years he'll get it right. But this president cannot tell us that you are better off today than when he took office."¹⁵ Romney particularly sought to appeal to female voters, recalling that his mother had run for the Senate because she thought that women should have as much say as men in the nation's decisions.

The Democrats met in Charlotte, North Carolina, the following week. Their platform reflected the ideological polarization between the parties. It endorsed gay marriage for the first time and reaffirmed support for abortion rights. The Democrats opposed attempts to “privatize or voucherize” Medicare and called climate change legislation (which the Republicans opposed) a top priority.¹⁶ The high point of the Democrats’ gathering turned out not to be Obama’s acceptance speech, but rather a speech by former President Bill Clinton the night before that delighted the crowd in the hall and received positive reactions from television viewers. Clinton took on the arguments the GOP had made at their convention, arguing that the “Republican argument against the president’s re-election was pretty simple: We left him a total mess, he hasn’t finished cleaning it up yet, so fire him and put us back in.”¹⁷ He offered a point-by-point defense of the president’s record, including a detailed argument for “Obamacare,” that was extensively laced with statistics, yet the audience responded enthusiastically. He criticized the Republicans for misrepresenting the president’s record and for their ideological rigidity, saying: “They think government is always the enemy, they’re always right, and compromise is weakness.”¹⁸ The Nielsen Company reported that an estimated 25.1 million people watched Clinton’s speech, even though it was scheduled opposite a professional football game, which drew 25 percent fewer people during the speech.¹⁹

The following night President Obama accepted the nomination for a second term. He defended his record and said that he was not offering a path forward that was “quick or easy,” but he painted the choice as fundamentally about the role of government. He said: “This is what the election comes down to. Over and over, we’ve been told by our opponents that bigger tax cuts and fewer regulations are the only way, that since government can’t do everything, it should do almost nothing.”²⁰ Obama expressed pride in what had been accomplished and strong hope for the country’s future, and he asked for the votes of those who shared his vision.

It is often the case that nominating conventions provide a boost in the polls to the candidate of the party holding them. After all, the party and its candidate receive a lot of attention and they largely control what is seen and heard. In 2012, with the conventions so close together, it is difficult to be sure of the effects, but data from the Gallup daily tracking poll appear to show essentially no gain for the GOP, followed by a small (but transitory) gain for Obama.²¹ The contest remained close with seven weeks left. Then on September 17, a story broke that seized the public’s attention. *Mother Jones* magazine released a video recorded earlier in the year at a meeting between Romney and a group of donors. In it Romney said that 47 percent of the people would vote for Obama “no matter what.” These were people

who are dependent on government, who believe they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them. . . . These are people who pay no income tax. . . . And so my job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.²²

Not surprisingly, the video and the reports on it produced strong public reactions and attacks from Democrats. Obama's campaign manager, Jim Messina, said: "It's hard to serve as president for all Americans when you've disdainfully written off half the nation."²³ Romney spokespersons sought to avoid direct comments on the videos, trying to defend the candidate's record more generally. But the campaign staff knew they were in trouble, and the polls began to reflect that.

"We had struggled pretty dramatically in September," said Neil Newhouse, Mr. Romney's pollster. "The 47 percent remark came out, and that was on top of the bounce that Obama got from his convention, so needless to say September was not our best month. It showed in the data. It was grim."²⁴

The shifts in the polls over the two weeks following the release of the video launched a controversy that would continue until election day: charges (mainly from conservatives) that the polls were inaccurate because they were "skewed." The disagreement stemmed from different opinions about the expected nature of the electorate, as we mentioned above. Polling organizations weight their interviews based on predictions about the demographic mix of the electorate that will vote. The Republicans claimed that the public polls rested on the incorrect assumption that the 2012 electorate would be similar to that of 2008. "I don't think [the polls] reflect the composition of what 2012 is going to look like," said Neil Newhouse.²⁵ Newhouse claimed that in 2012 "you have a more enthused and energetic Republican electorate. . . . So instead of a 7 [percentage point advantage for Democrats], I expect something smaller than that."²⁶

The Debates

Regardless of the precise standings of the candidates, Romney's campaign staff thought they were in trouble in September, and the main chance they saw for turning things around was the upcoming first presidential debate on October 3. And in that context, they did see hope. Romney's senior strategists argued that Obama would underestimate their candidate and fail to prepare adequately. Moreover, the Democrats' negative campaign would lead the public to approach the debate with low expectations for Romney that he could exceed.²⁷ The GOP candidate devoted a lot of time and effort to debate preparation. Practice sessions were conducted with Senator Rob Portman of Ohio playing the role of the president. The final practice was conducted with Romney in full makeup in a room that replicated the hall where the real session would take place. The Sunday before the event, a group of top advisors gathered in Boston to reassure the candidate, and former president George W. Bush phoned to offer encouragement.²⁸

Obama's advisors saw the same potential problems for their candidate that the GOP advisors had. Ronald Klain, a strategist who had assisted Democrats in debate preparation for two decades, warned Obama that incumbent presidents almost always lose the first debate. Moreover, Romney had gone through twenty

debates over the previous year, while the president was out of practice. But Obama was unconvinced, and when he went to a Nevada resort for a few days of reparation he ducked out one day for a visit to Hoover Dam.²⁹

In the actual event, it quickly became apparent that the expectations of both parties' strategists were correct. Romney was relaxed and confident, projecting a moderate image. Obama, on the other hand, was hesitant and halting in his statements. Romney took positions that were more moderate than those he had taken in the primaries and in previous weeks during the campaign. He stated that he did not support tax cuts for the wealthy even though he previously said that his tax plan would cut taxes for everyone, "including the top 1 percent." And when asked if there was too much government regulation, he responded: "regulation is essential."³⁰ The president failed to effectively challenge Romney for being inconsistent. This may, in part, have been due to advice he had received from advisors to avoid confrontational exchanges with his opponent because they might alienate voters and damage their good opinion of the president.³¹ Those people undoubtedly regretted that advice on debate night. The audience for the debate was substantial. The Nielsen ratings indicated that 67.2 million people had seen it on television, the largest audience for a first debate since 1980, and there were additional viewers on the Internet.³² And their view of the outcome was unequivocal: in a CNN/ORC International poll, Romney was seen as the winner by 42 points, 67 to 25 percent.³³

Next in the debate sequence was the vice presidential debate on October 11. Not surprisingly, it received less attention than the presidential events. Romney's running mate, Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, sought to defend the GOP nominee and to soften his image with personal stories, but Vice President Joe Biden frequently interrupted with disagreements and comments, including attacks on Ryan's proposal to alter the Medicare program that he had included in the House Republicans' budget proposal. Biden also mocked Ryan for attacking and opposing Obama's economic stimulus proposal and then seeking funds for his constituents under that plan.³⁴

Five days later, the second presidential debate took place. This time Obama did not hold back from the attack: the exchanges were sharp, and the tensions between the candidates were apparent. The president began with an attack that his campaign had been using widely in the industrial Midwestern states, attacking Romney for his opposition to the administration's bailout of the major auto companies in 2009. Then during his closing statement, the president criticized his opponent for his remarks about "the 47 percent." Obama said: "When he said behind closed doors that 47 percent of the country considers themselves victims who refuse personal responsibility—think about who he was talking about."³⁵ Throughout the debate Romney attacked Obama's record of performance, mentioning multiple times the number of people who were unemployed. In the aftermath, the public's view of the results were much closer than after the first debate, with respondents to a CNN/ORC International poll choosing Obama as the winner by 46 to 39 percent.³⁶

The final debate, on October 22, was supposed to focus on foreign policy, but the discussion frequently veered off to domestic issues, including the economy, the auto bailout, and Romney's tax plan. Romney attacked the administration for being weak and ineffective, especially in the Middle East. He criticized the president for reducing the number of ships in the Navy to the lowest level in a century. Obama admitted that the country had fewer ships, but he went on: "Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military's changed. We have these things called aircraft carriers where planes land on them. We have these ships that go underwater, nuclear submarines."³⁷ The president also attacked his opponent for having foreign policy and other views rooted in the past. He said: "you seem to want to import the foreign policy of the 1980s, just like the social policies of the 1950s, and the economic policies of the 1920s."³⁸ After the debate, polls gave the edge to Obama. A CNN poll picked him as the winner with 48 percent to Romney's 40 percent, while a CBS poll of undecided voters had 53 percent saying Obama was the winner, with 23 percent for Romney, and 24 percent saying it was a tie.³⁹

The consensus among political scientists is that presidential debates usually do not have a significant impact on a race.⁴⁰ The most prominent explanation is that by the time the debates occur, the vast majority of voters have made up their minds and are thus unlikely to have their position reversed by the event. There are, however, a few exceptions where some analysts perceive a greater impact. These include 1960 (Kennedy vs. Nixon), 1976 (Ford vs. Carter), and 1984 (Reagan vs. Mondale). Robert Erikson and Christopher Wlezien took a systematic look at the ten presidential elections with debates (1960 and 1976–2008), comparing the poll standings of candidates before and after the debates. They found that, with one exception, the pre-debate polls were closely matched by the post-debate polls. The exception was 1976, when Carter was already in decline before the debates and the decline persisted. They conclude that debates do not have as great an impact as the conventions (the effect of which they find to be substantial), but that they may have as much or more of an effect than other campaign events.⁴¹ It appears, however, that 2012 may be another exception. Data from Real Clear Politics (which averages results for all major polls over a time interval) shows that on October 3, the day of the first debate, Obama had a 3.1 percentage point lead in the poll averages, while on October 23 (the last debate's date), Romney led by 0.9 points.⁴² That was a four-point swing in favor of Romney, and it left the race in doubt with just two weeks to go.

THE END GAME AND THE STRUGGLE OVER TURNOUT

The Final Two Weeks

On October 24, two days after the final debate, Obama launched a tour of a set of eight swing states over two days. Appearing in Denver, Colorado, he attacked Romney for changing positions so often that voters could not trust him, saying

that Romney hoped that the public would come down with “Romnesia” and forget.⁴³ Other stops on the tour included California (appearing on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*), Florida, Virginia, and Ohio. Obama’s Ohio efforts focused persistently on his auto bailout plan (which had provided federal funds to prevent General Motors and Chrysler from going bankrupt), and the GOP campaign was worried. The recovery of the auto industry had helped Ohio outperform the national economy, and this helped propel the president to a solid position in polls of the state. So the Republicans sought to counter the president’s appeal on the issue. A few days after Obama’s visit, the Romney forces debuted a commercial that indicated that “Chrysler, a bailout recipient, is going to begin producing Jeeps in China, leaving the misleading impression that the move would come at the expense of jobs here.”⁴⁴ The ad provoked a lot of negative reactions. Chrysler called the suggestions that they were moving jobs to China “fantasies,” and news media in the state and nationally characterized the ad as misleading. The Democrats countered with their own ad claiming that Romney’s assertions were false and reminding voters that the Republican candidate had opposed Obama’s bailout plan.⁴⁵

While this dispute was playing out in the Midwest, in the East a different drama was occurring. A storm had been moving up the East Coast, and on Monday, October 29, Hurricane Sandy came ashore at New Jersey and New York. It would be the most damaging storm of the year. The destruction was enormous, closing area airports due to flooding and knocking out power in southern Manhattan and forcing the cancellation of the New York Marathon. Much of the New Jersey coast was devastated. The president immediately promised a strong federal response, cancelling campaign activities. The following day he spoke to victims at a Red Cross office. On Wednesday, Obama toured hard-hit areas with New Jersey’s Republican Governor Chris Christie. (Christie had been the keynote speaker at the Republican convention, where he extensively attacked the president and his administration.)

This crisis gave the president the opportunity to be seen dealing with a pressing public problem without being overtly political. It was no surprise that this would yield political benefits in public opinion. What was surprising was the reinforcement of this effect from a most unusual source: Governor Christie. He was effusive in his praise of the president, saying on Fox News that “I have to give the president great credit.”⁴⁶ He went on to say that Obama’s response had been “outstanding” and that “he deserves my praise, and he will get it no matter what the calendar says.” When asked if Romney might be invited to tour the state as well, Christie responded: “I have no idea, nor am I in the least concerned or interested. I’ve a job to do here in New Jersey that’s much bigger than presidential politics, and I could (not) care less about any of that stuff.”⁴⁷ Obama returned the favor, telling people in an emergency shelter: “I want you to know that your governor is working overtime to make sure that as soon as possible that everything can get back to normal,” and later praised Christie’s “extraordinary leadership.”⁴⁸

Obama's and Romney's campaigning were interrupted by the hurricane crisis, but others continued in their stead. Chief among these for the Democrats was Bill Clinton. The former president began working on Obama's behalf shortly after the party's convention. For example, he appeared in Florida on September 11, reprising many details of his convention speech. There he said: "The test is not whether you think everything is hunky-dory; if that were the test, the president would vote against himself. The test is whether he's taking us in the right direction, and the answer to that is yes."⁴⁹ But after the October decline, he offered to step up his efforts. The day after the last debate Clinton met with Jim Messina and offered to campaign for the president every one of the last ten days of the campaign. Then, after viewing his proposed schedule, he called Messina and said: "I can do more than this."⁵⁰

At the close of the campaign, the economic news remained mixed. On the Friday before election day, the Labor Department announced that 171,000 seasonally adjusted jobs were added in October, about the average since July and double the rate in the spring. The unemployment rate increased slightly from 7.8 percent to 7.9 percent, mainly because more Americans were looking for work.⁵¹

Mobilizing the Vote

In 2008, the Democrats' voter identification and mobilization efforts had been very successful.⁵² But in 2012 they took a big leap forward in terms of technology and effort. When Jim Messina took on the job of campaign manager, he said: "We are going to measure every single thing in this campaign."⁵³ Messina "hired an analytics department five times the size that of the 2008 campaign."⁵⁴ These analysts believed that the product of their efforts—their data—was the principal advantage Obama had over his opponent, and they guarded it diligently. The operation was even separated to a degree from the rest of the Chicago headquarters, in a windowless room within the office.

Despite the success of 2008, one problem the campaign had was too many databases. Fund-raising lists were separate from get-out-the-vote lists. So over the eighteen months beginning in early 2009, "the campaign started over, creating a single massive system that could merge the information collected from pollsters, fundraisers, field workers, and consumer databases as well as social media and mobile contacts with the main Democratic voter files in the swing states."⁵⁵ This enormous compilation permitted the campaign to do more than just isolate individuals who might support the president. It made it possible to predict who was likely to donate online or by mail. They could also model who might volunteer. They experimented with different messages for different groups of people, and then tracked the results and used them to make future larger appeals more efficient.

Since Obama had no primary contest, the main use for the database early on was to raise money, with more success than many thought possible. The core device was the use of dozens of targeted email appeals each day. The staff

“discovered that people who signed up for the campaign’s Quick Donate program, which allowed repeat giving online via text message without having to re-enter credit-card information, gave about four times as much as other donors. So the program was expanded and incentivized.”⁵⁶ The Obama operation was often able to get initial small donors to give again, and to increase the amount when they did. The campaign eventually amassed a total of 812,858 donors, 69 percent of whom began with a donation of \$200 or less. Romney’s campaign, on the other hand, had only about half as many donors (393,603), a smaller percentage of whom started with donations under \$200.⁵⁷ The Democrats were also better able to induce repeat donations: the average number of itemized contributions per donor to Obama in 2012 was 5.01 (up from 3.75 four years earlier), while the average for Romney was 2.26.

The fund-raising data, however, show that “not all dollars are created equal.” The Romney campaign “raised as much as Obama’s once you count joint fundraising committee and party money [about \$1 billion for each party]—and more if you count allied Super PACs. But the fundraising did little to mobilize.” Moreover, because a larger share of Obama’s funds went directly to his campaign committee, they were worth more. “Political parties cannot take advantage of advertising price discounts (lowest unit rate costs) that are available only to candidates.”

In the last month, Obama’s massive trove of data was refocused on the turnout effort. The campaign amassed polling data on 29,000 people in Ohio alone.⁵⁸ This sample permitted more detailed analysis on demographic groups than had usually been possible in campaigns. The polling and voter-contact data were also used to run electoral simulations nightly to estimate the chances of carrying individual states. The results were used to allocate resources. The data also permitted “the first-ever attempt at using Facebook on a mass scale to replicate the door-knocking efforts of field organizers.” Persons connected with the Obama efforts were encouraged to download a phone app. Near the end of the campaign, those people

were sent messages with pictures of their friends in swing states. They were told to click on a button to automatically urge those targeted voters to take certain actions, such as registering to vote, voting early or getting to the polls. The campaign found that roughly 1 in 5 people contacted by a Facebook pal acted on the request.⁵⁹

The Romney campaign, too, sought to build its get-out-the-vote effort, also trying to employ social media. The campaign’s digital director, Zac Moffatt, said: “We have digital staff in every target state, with regional digital directors for every part of the country.” And while they trailed Obama in Facebook “likes,” 8.6 million to 30.6 million, they asserted that a higher proportion of their followers discussed the presidential contest (30 percent to 10 percent).⁶⁰ These efforts were supplemented by the work and independent spending of conservative super PACs. For example, Americans for Prosperity, funded by the Koch brothers, a

pair of billionaire businessmen, said in late October that it had “more than 100 paid field workers nationwide and about 5,000 volunteers to go door to door. The group plans to spend \$130 million this year on all activities, up from \$14 million four years ago.”⁶¹

One aspect of the turnout efforts was a focus on demographic groups, and in this connection the greatest focus was on Latinos. Obama had won about two-thirds of this group’s votes in 2008, and the Republicans recognized they had to increase their appeal to Latino voters, who in 2012 constituted about 10.4 percent of the voting-age population of the United States. One part of their strategy was to emphasize the slow economic recovery and focus on social issues because poll data indicated that Latinos were more conservative on those matters than most Democratic voters. The GOP’s task was complicated by the conservative stands on immigration of Romney and his opponents during the primary season. Romney tried to moderate his position in the general election, but with limited success. The Democrats also focused strongly on the Latino vote, and their advantage was reinforced when in late June Obama adopted a policy of blocking the deportation of many young illegal immigrants who had been brought to the United States as children. A *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll showed that the proportion of Latinos nationally who said they had “very positive” views of Obama jumped ten percentage points (to 41 percent) over the previous month, and among this group Obama led Romney 66 to 26 percent.⁶²

Another aspect of the get-out-the-vote efforts involved litigation. As in the 2008 race, Republicans in many states sought to block efforts to make registration easier and to increase voter identification requirements. They also tried to restrict early voting. Many of these efforts were met by lawsuits from Democrats and others concerned about voting rights. The restrictions often did not fare very well with the courts. Lawrence Norden of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law School said: “Every voter restriction challenged this year has been either enjoined, blocked, or weakened.” This included blocked or delayed voter ID laws in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin.⁶³ In addition, an Ohio attempt to cut short early voting was voided by the federal courts. Anticipating a possible photo finish in the race, both parties had marshaled lawyers around the country for challenges to vote counts, but the clear result on election day made those plans moot.

The Final Days

As we noted above, on October 23 the Real Clear Politics average of polls showed Romney with a 0.9 percentage point lead. Over the next week the poll average remained at that level, but on October 31 (two days after Hurricane Sandy hit), a spate of new polls showed another shift: the race was tied. Then over the next few days Obama began to open up a small lead, and on election day he led by a margin of 0.7 points in the poll average. It was hardly a safe cushion, and the outcome remained in doubt, but it was an improvement. It left both candidates

feeling that victory was within reach, and the campaigns launched a massive final effort for the last couple of days.

On the Sunday and Monday before election day, the four candidates for president and vice president combined for fourteen stops in eight states each day. On Sunday, Romney made the last of at least fourteen trips to Iowa during the general election. In Des Moines, he asked 4,000 attendees at a rally to reach out to friends who were undecided. His speech continued his frequent argument that Obama had failed to bring the change that he had promised. He said: "You can't measure change in speeches. You measure change in achievements."⁶⁴

Romney had originally planned to end his campaigning Monday night in New Hampshire, where he had a vacation home and where he had announced his candidacy in June 2011. However, with the race so tight he and his staff decided to add two more stops, in Cleveland and Pittsburgh on Tuesday.⁶⁵ Various journalists drew different conclusions from these last-minute additions. To some, the visit to Pennsylvania was evidence that the campaign really thought that Romney was going to win because they were expending effort in a state the GOP had not carried in over twenty years.⁶⁶ (Pennsylvania polls had shown the race tightening over previous days.) Others, however, saw the choice as a long-shot effort in light of the president's improved position nationally.⁶⁷

Obama's last efforts were as vigorous as Romney's, but they carried with them more nostalgia because this would be his final campaign. In the waning months of the campaign he frequently made reference to "lasts" ("the last debate prep practice," "the last debate"). The crowds were often smaller than they had been four years earlier, "but they are enthusiastic, and he draws energy from them."⁶⁸ On Sunday he made another stop in New Hampshire, accompanied by Bill Clinton, where the former president again attacked Romney for frequent switches in his position on the auto bailout.⁶⁹ Obama ended the campaign in Des Moines, Iowa, at 10 p.m. after earlier visits to Madison, Wisconsin, and Columbus, Ohio. He made reference to the Iowa caucuses in 2008, and his victory in them that had launched his successful effort to secure his party's nomination. There he said: "I've come back to Iowa one more time to ask for your vote. To ask for you to help us finish what we started, because this is where our movement for change began. Right here."⁷⁰

DID THE CAMPAIGN MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

It is appropriate to ask whether the general election campaign made any difference, and the answer depends on the yardstick used to measure the campaign's effects. Did it determine the winner? Did it affect the choices of a substantial number of voters? Did it put issues and candidates' positions clearly before the voters? Would a better campaign by one of the candidates have yielded a different result? Did the campaign produce events that will have a lasting impact on American politics? We cannot provide firm answers to all of these questions, but we can shed light on some of them.

Regarding the outcome and voters' decisions, it seems quite clear that the campaign did indeed have an effect.⁷¹ As noted above, the relative standing of the candidates ebbed and flowed from the conventions to November, and these changes seemed to be linked in part to events in the campaign. The Democrats' convention seemed to give them a boost denied to their opponents, but Obama's lackluster performance in the first debate appeared to reverse the trend. Then, after falling a bit behind, the president seemed to benefit from public reactions to his efforts in response to Hurricane Sandy. Nine percent of respondents to the exit polls indicated that they had made up their minds either on election day or "in the last few days," and Obama won this group by about six points. While we may not be certain of the import of various events during the months after both candidates' nominations, or the precise magnitude of their impact, it seems fair to conclude that either of the major candidates could have won if the voting had taken place at a different date during the period.

Another point is the mere fact of the president's success despite the vastly different political landscape compared to four years earlier. In 2008 the playing field was clearly tilted in favor of the Democrats, with Bush being so unpopular and (relatedly) the economy being so deep in recession. Seventy-five percent of respondents in the exit polls thought the country was on the wrong track. In 2012, on the other hand, the Democrats' previous advantages had significantly dissipated. A majority (52 percent) said in the exit polls that the country was on the wrong track, and 77 percent said that the state of the economy was either not so good or poor. Yet Obama's campaign was able to persuade many voters that most of the responsibility for this state of affairs did not belong to the president. When asked who was more to blame for the current economic problems, 53 percent of respondents said George W. Bush, while only 38 percent named Obama. Finally, the exit polls buttressed the view that Obama's hurricane response helped his cause. Exit-poll results showed that 64 percent said that it was at least a minor factor in their vote, and that group chose Obama 62 percent to 36 percent over Romney. Indeed, 15 percent said it was the most important factor, and among them the president won 73 percent to 26 percent.

Perhaps the best evidence of the campaign's impact relates to turnout. As we said, the Republicans believed that their candidate would win because the electorate in 2012 would be significantly less favorable to the Democrats than the electorate of 2008 had been, while the Democrats were convinced that they could maintain the character of the electorate. Indeed, the GOP conviction remained through the counting on election night. For example, when Fox News concluded at 11:13 p.m. on election night that Obama had won the state of Ohio and the presidency, Karl Rove (Bush's former political advisor and the leader of a major GOP super PAC) confronted and contradicted the network's team of voting analysts on the air.⁷² Rove had heard contradictory news from within the Romney operation and was convinced there was a problem. But as it turned out, he was wrong about Ohio and the national electorate. Comparing the 2012 and 2008 exit polls, the proportion claiming to be Democrats was only 1 percent

smaller (38 vs. 37 percent), and the proportions of independents and Republicans were the same (29 and 32 percent, respectively). Demographically, the proportion of blacks and Asians was the same as in 2008 (13 and 3 percent, respectively), and the proportion of Latinos was 1 percent higher (10 vs. 9 percent). Moreover, within that latter group, support for Obama increased from 67 percent to 71 percent. Later analysis by the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that turnout among African Americans exceeded that among whites for the first time on record, 66.2 percent to 64.1 percent.⁷³ Finally, the proportion of young voters (18–29 years old) also increased a bit, from 18 percent to 19 percent, although their support for the president declined from 66 percent to 60 percent.

The success of the Democrats' mobilization effort is indicated by the turnout data compiled for 2008 and 2012 by Michael McDonald of George Mason University.⁷⁴ McDonald and his colleagues show that nationally the overall turnout rate among the eligible population declined by 3.4 points, from 61.6 percent to 58.2 percent. However, the decline was not equal across the states. In particular, the decline was smaller, on average, in the battleground states. Table 2-1 lists the thirteen battleground states and their turnout in the two elections. The average decline in those states was only 2.1 percent. Those results combined with Obama's success in winning twelve of the thirteen most contested states suggest that the Democrats' turnout operation played a significant role in the president's reelection.

TABLE 2-1 Change in Turnout among the Voting-Eligible Population in Battleground States and Nationally, 2008–2012

	Turnout 2012	Turnout 2008	Change 2008–2012
National	61.6	58.2	–3.4
Colorado	71.0	70.3	–0.7
Florida	66.1	63.5	–2.6
Iowa	69.4	69.9	+0.5
Michigan	69.2	64.7	–4.5
Minnesota	77.8	75.7	–3.1
Nevada	57.0	57.1	+0.1
New Hampshire	71.7	70.1	–1.6
New Mexico	60.9	54.7	–6.2
North Carolina	65.5	64.6	–0.9
Ohio	66.9	64.6	–3.3
Pennsylvania	63.6	59.4	–4.2
Virginia	67.0	66.4	–0.6
Wisconsin	72.4	72.5	+0.1
Average change for thirteen battleground states			–2.1

Source: <http://elections.gmu.edu>. Compiled by authors.

Finally there is the question of whether a better campaign by a candidate, specifically by Romney, would have led to a different result. Many observers have expressed the view that either a better candidate than Romney, or a better campaign by him, could have carried the race.⁷⁵ On the first claim, it is not clear what alternative candidate would have been successful, or whether such a candidate could have won the GOP nomination. Regarding the quality of the campaign, however, the views of the critics seem more plausible. One factor was Romney's decision to seek the nomination by running to the right of his opponents by taking extreme positions on immigration and social issues (e.g., promising to eliminate Planned Parenthood and reverse *Roe v. Wade*, among others). That decision "made the distance he had to travel to get back to the middle just too great," and he waited too long (until the first debate) to make the effort.⁷⁶ He was unable to convince enough voters that the moderate persona he portrayed in the final six weeks was genuine.

Of course, as we have indicated, the Obama attacks on Romney were very well planned and effective, and there was nothing he could do to prevent that. But there were other mistakes that played into his opponent's plans and undermined efforts to counter them. Obama sought to portray Romney as a rich "fat cat" who was different from ordinary people and who would be unconcerned with their problems as president, and this approach appeared to work. In the exit polls, 53 percent of respondents said that Romney's policies would generally favor the rich, while 44 percent said Obama's policies would favor the middle class. Certainly the worst gaffe on this score was the remark about the "47 percent," but it wasn't the only one. Romney also refused to make public more than two years of his tax returns (permitting the Democrats to claim he had something to hide) and he resisted supplying details on what deductions he would eliminate in his tax reform plan. These and other similar moves made it difficult for the Romney campaign to make a sufficiently convincing case for replacing the incumbent, despite the public's doubts about Obama. We cannot re-run the campaign to demonstrate that alternative strategies by Romney would have succeeded, but there seems to be a good deal of evidence that a better effort could have been made.