

Trailing G.O.P. With Cameras, Seeking Gaffes



Doug Mills/The New York Times

Chris Harris and Tiffany Germain in American Bridge 21st Century's Washington “war room.”

By [MICHAEL D. SHEAR](#)

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AMHERST, N.H. — Aaron Fielding quietly stalks his prey — Republicans — with his video camera, patiently waiting for a political moment worthy of YouTube.

At 27, he is a full-time “tracker” for American Bridge 21st Century, a new Democratic organization that aims to record every handshake, every utterance by Republican candidates in 2011 and 2012, looking for gotcha moments that could derail political ambitions or provide fodder for television advertisements by liberal groups next year.

The organization has hired a dozen professional trackers like Mr. Fielding, outfitted them with the latest high-tech cameras and computers and positioned them in key states where Republican candidates are busy chattering away to voters. If all works as planned, incriminating moments captured by [American Bridge](#) will quickly become part of the political bloodstream.

Combined with a team of 20 researchers in a Washington “war room” that has a large rack of computer servers, the effort is part of a push by Democratic groups to bolster their opposition research. Republicans also have trackers, but so far have not assembled the kind of centralized video archive of political caught-on-tape moments that their rivals envision.

“Our obligation here is to get these guys on the record with what they really believe so they can’t walk away from their record,” said Rodell Mollineau, a former aide to Senator Harry Reid of Nevada and the group’s president. “There are many opportunities for us to record Republicans showing their true colors.”

For Mr. Fielding, that has meant a month of crisscrossing New Hampshire to catch Republican presidential hopefuls at house parties, Main Street strolls, diner meet-and-greets and speeches to local chamber groups. He has filmed Jon M. Huntsman Jr., the former governor of Utah, more than a dozen times.

On Monday, his target was Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, who was in town for the annual July 4 parade in Amherst. As Mr. Romney sprinted from one side of the parade route to the other, chased by reporters and TV camera crews, Mr. Fielding was there, too. Sporting an Under Armour baseball cap (on backward), a heavy backpack and sunglasses, he captured Mr. Romney’s awkward handshake with Mr. Huntsman, the brief interviews with reporters and the occasional conversation with voters.

Hours later, when Mr. Romney appeared on the village green in Andover, about 55 miles north of Amherst, Mr. Fielding was waiting, camera in hand.

“I’ve seen most of these candidates multiple times,” Mr. Fielding said. “I know what they are saying. I know when they’ve changed. You have to just be with them the whole time, have the camera ready and make sure you have batteries.”

The ability to film a politician while walking backward is a must. So is a bit of chutzpah: The job calls for walking uninvited into New Hampshire house parties until you are asked to leave. (That has not happened to Mr. Fielding — yet.) He has gotten to know some of the Republican staff members, and they are beginning to know him.

Mr. Fielding is a descendent of sorts of S. R. Sidarth, the Democratic tracker who in 2006 captured Senator George Allen of Virginia calling him “macaca” — a term critics viewed as a racial slur. [That incident](#) helped destroy Mr. Allen’s re-election campaign and proved the power of the tracker. But Mr. Fielding is no mere volunteer. A veteran of campaigns in Louisiana and New Mexico, he is what American Bridge refers to as a “seasoned political operative.”

“I pay attention to what the important issues are,” Mr. Fielding said. “This is where the meat of the campaign is.”

Mr. Fielding’s efforts on July 4 produced no embarrassing moments. But officials at American Bridge insist that is not the point. Along with the video he uploaded, Mr. Fielding sent in detailed, time-coded “field reports” that will be entered into a searchable database and used to index the hours of video from the event.

If a Democratic group is ever looking for the image of Mr. Romney paying for a 25-cent lemonade with a \$5 bill, it will know just where to go. If it wants a clip of Mr. Romney saying the president has made the economy worse, the archive will have one. Or if it needs Mr. Romney talking about World War II veterans, it will be able to find it.

“I can come up with the spin. I need the facts,” said Paul Begala, a former top adviser to President Bill Clinton and a senior strategist for [Priorities USA Action](#), an outside group that is working to re-elect President Obama. Mr. Begala said American Bridge would help fuel his group’s ads. “Let’s go to the videotape!”

While the Democratic National Committee and Democratic candidates also have trackers, federal campaign laws prohibit the outside organizations from coordinating closely enough to use their videotapes in their advertising efforts.

American Bridge is the creation of David Brock, the founder of [Media Matters for America](#), which critiques conservative media outlets, particularly Fox News. Once a leader of right-wing attacks on Mr. Clinton, Mr. Brock is a liberal convert, now seeking ways to have a bigger impact.

His initial plans to create a fund-raising group to produce television ads fizzled, forcing the more targeted approach that became American Bridge. While there is suspicion among some Democratic operatives that Mr. Brock is more interested in promoting himself than his cause, others are more optimistic.

Susan McCue, who heads Majority PAC, a group that will support Democratic Senate candidates, said of Mr. Brock and American Bridge: “We talk all the time. The relationships are in place to avoid any strategic conflict.” Mr. Brock declined to comment for this article.

By tapping into his network of Media Matters donors, American Bridge officials say they have raised several million dollars and hope to bring in \$15 million to make the group part of a new liberal infrastructure that will last far beyond the 2012 cycle.

On the Republican side, which has no exact counterpart to American Bridge, strategists say they are not worried.

“In the age of cellphone cameras, everybody thinks of themselves as a tracker,” said Carl Forti, who heads [Crossroads GPS](#), the largest of the Republican superPACs.

Democrats, though, are hoping that American Bridge can give them an edge. “It shouldn’t be that when you watch ‘The Daily Show’ at night they have the best video footage of our candidates,” said Bradley Beychok, the campaign director at American Bridge.

In New Hampshire, that is the goal that gets Mr. Fielding out of bed, sometimes as early as 5 a.m., and into his white Ford 500 for another day of chasing after candidates.

On Monday, he missed an opportunity when he stationed himself at the main parade stage, only to be out of position when Mr. Romney gave an impromptu speech elsewhere. But later, in Andover, Mr. Romney’s advance team set up its portable stage right in front of him.

“Sometimes,” he said, camera running, “you just get lucky.”

Obama Mines for Voters With High-Tech Tools



Daniel Borris for The New York Times

Inside a Chicago office complex, Obama aides sift through reams of data about supporters.

By [JIM RUTENBERG](#) and [JEFF ZELENY](#)

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CHICAGO — With a “chief scientist” specializing in consumer behavior, an “analytics department” monitoring voter trends, and a squad of dozens huddled at computer screens editing video or writing code, the sprawling office complex inside One Prudential Plaza looks like a corporate research and development lab — Ping-Pong table and all.

But it is home to the largely secret engine of [President Obama](#)’s re-election campaign, where scores of political strategists, data analysts, corporate marketers and Web producers are sifting through information gleaned from Facebook, voter logs and hundreds of thousands of telephone or in-person conversations to reassemble and re-energize the scattered coalition of supporters who swept Mr. Obama into the White House four years ago.

Mr. Obama has already begun reprising his election-style appearances of 2008, attacking Republicans and defending his record as he did in a White House press briefing on Tuesday. And his team is ready to begin a major election-year advertising blitz at a moment’s notice once the Republican nominating contest appears to be drawing to a close.

But a huge part of the effort here is dedicated to less flashy yet potentially vital behind-the-scenes work to address some of Mr. Obama’s more hidden political challenges.

Many of the small donors who gave early and often in 2008 have failed to rematerialize, (though officials say that with new donors and increasing enthusiasm they have no doubt that they will at least raise the \$750 million they did then). Some of the volunteers who went to work enlisting friends and neighbors have been turned off by unmet expectations and the hard realities of partisan Washington, though the Republican attacks on Mr. Obama this year have helped bring some back into the fray.

And, campaign officials say, they have literally lost track of many reliable Democratic voters, particularly lower-income people who have lost their homes or their jobs or both, and can no longer be reached at the addresses or phone numbers the campaign has on file.

So Mr. Obama's re-election team is sifting through reams of data available through the Internet or fed to it by its hundreds of staff members on the ground in all 50 states, identifying past or potential supporters and donors and testing e-mail and Web-based messages that can entice them back into the fold.

Campaign officials said the Republican fight for the nomination had bought them critical time to develop their campaign machinery. They have been carefully tracking the comments of Mitt Romney and his rivals, holding a news conference Wednesday, for instance, where they sought to portray Mr. Romney's performance in the Super Tuesday nominating contests in the most negative light possible.

But for now, "that is a side show," Jim Messina, the campaign manager, said in an interview.

The president's re-election base here looks more like a company than a campaign. For the last year, an office that appears nearly as long and as wide as a football field has steadily grown, with more than 300 workers now sitting bunched together. The campaign declines to say how many additional employees are posted in offices across the county, but a payroll of \$3 million in January suggests the staff is larger than any ever assembled for a presidential race.

Having spent \$48 million already, the campaign invested heavily in its effort to find and reconnect with past donors and volunteers, as well as identify potential supporters, and to entice them all to engage, through small donations, say, or by volunteering for one of the thousands of neighborhood "teams" the campaign is seeking to build across the nation.

For instance, with the help of Web developers recruited from the private sector, it has dedicated considerable hours creating technology that can make its Web site, barackobama.com, fit perfectly onto any screen, be it an [iPhone](#), Blackberry or Droid — a seemingly small detail that campaign officials say can make a huge difference when it comes to enticing donors or volunteers to stay connected or click a "donate" button.

It has tested various messages sent to different profiles of Internet users to see which get the best responses in terms of commitments of money or time — a single color change, advisers say, can keep an online user on site for longer. That effort has been helped along by the chief scientist, Rayid Ghani, who joined the campaign last year from Accenture Technology Labs in Chicago.

A review of Mr. Ghani's academic papers during his time at Accenture shows that he specializes in gleaning consumers' personal interests from available data online, and then developing messages to entice them to buy certain products based on predictive models of human behavior.

“Given the large amounts of data being captured by retailers and the emergence of personal devices that consumers will have access to while shopping in retail stores, the challenge is to create applications and techniques that can learn patterns of behaviors for individual customers and then enable interactions that are highly personalized,” read [a paper](#) he helped write, “Data Mining for Individual Consumer Models and Personalized Retail Promotions.”

Obama campaign officials declined to describe Mr. Ghani's work in detail. But, in interviews, they said they were intensely studying ways to reach their supporters and to figure out what sorts of messages are most likely to get the best responses.

Officials said they were not indiscriminately scooping up personal data on potential supporters. All of the people they are seeking to contact or tailor messages to, they said, had either provided their e-mail addresses to the campaign or connected with it via its Web site or social network sites like Facebook.

With 13 million e-mail subscribers as of 2009, more than 12 million Twitter subscribers and some 25 million followers of its Facebook page (compared with, for instance, 1.5 million following Mr. Romney), the campaign has instantaneous access to a huge universe of people, a considerable percentage of the more than 69 million people who voted Obama in 2008, though the campaign refuses to divulge specific numbers.

On top of that, its staff and volunteers around the country are regularly feeding back information from personal contacts they make by phone, e-mail and in person as they seek to understand the voting preferences of people in virtually every neighborhood in the top electoral battlegrounds.

The Obama campaign does not claim to be reinventing the wheel; as in 2008, it is in many ways emulating the 2004 Bush campaign, which had a similar focus on building a volunteer army and highly focused and individualized messages for potential volunteers, donors and voters using personal data. And the Republican Party and its 2012 nominee are certain to employ the same techniques to the degree they have the time and money to catch up.

But the Obama team does claim to be building perhaps the biggest such wheel ever made, with a scale officials called “unprecedented.”

Veterans of President George W. Bush's re-election effort said they did not doubt it, saying there was no comparing the amount of online data and communication available now compared with just eight years ago.

“What is new is the power of the Web, the sophistication of what you can do to target people on the Internet, which is 100 percent new and continues to evolve,” said Sara Taylor Fagen, a senior strategist in the 2004 Bush campaign who is now a specialist in online advertising and analytics.

Both supporters and critics of the Obama campaign's approach say it may in the end change the outcome by only a few percentage points. But that, campaign officials said, is enough.

“We’re under no illusions that this is going to be anything but a close race,” Mr. Messina, the campaign manager, said. “We are preparing for a very close race, as we always have been.”

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Online Data Helping Campaigns Customize Ads

By [TANZINA VEGA](#)

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Political campaigns, which have borrowed tricks from Madison Avenue for decades, are now fully engaged on the latest technological frontier in advertising: aiming specific ads at potential supporters based on where they live, the Web sites they visit and their voting records.

In recent primaries, two kinds of Republican voters have been seeing two different Mitt Romney video ads pop up on local and national news Web sites. The first, called "[It's Time to Return American Optimism](#)," showed the candidate on the campaign trail explaining how this was an election "to save the soul of America." It was aimed at committed party members to encourage a large turnout. The second video ad, geared toward voters who have not yet aligned themselves with a candidate, focused more on Mr. Romney as a family man. Versions of the two ads were seen online in Florida, Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina.

Kenneth M. Goldstein, the president of the Campaign and Media Analysis Group at [Kantar Media](#), part of the advertising giant WPP, said Mr. Romney's directed ads represented a sea change in political advertising.

"Forty years ago, you'd watch the same evening news ad as your Democratic neighbor," Mr. Goldstein said.

The technology that makes such customized advertising possible is called microtargeting, which is similar to the techniques nonpolitical advertisers use to serve up, for example, hotel ads online to people who had shopped for vacations recently.

In the last few years, companies that collect data on how consumers behave both online and off and what charitable donations they make have combined that vast store of information with voter registration records.

As a result, microtargeting allows campaigns to put specific messages in front of specific voters — something that has increased in sophistication with the large buckets of data available to political consultants.

Zac Moffatt, the digital director for Mr. Romney's campaign, worked with a company called [Targeted Victory](#) for the online ads. "Two people in the same house could get different messages," Mr. Moffatt said. "Not only will the message change, the type of content will change."

Few campaigns like to talk about this kind of advertising. Representatives from the Obama campaign and the Gingrich campaign would not confirm whether they were using targeted ads tied to voter data. Saul Anuzis, chairman of the Republican National Committee on Technology,

said he expected spending on digital political ads to reach 10 to 15 percent of campaign budgets in the 2012 election season.

Those numbers pale beside what campaigns will spend on television or direct mail. But the chief benefit of microtargeting is that campaigns can spend their money more efficiently by finding a particular audience and paying \$5 to \$9 per thousand displays of an ad, Mr. Anuzis said.

“We can now literally target the household,” Mr. Anuzis said.

Microtargeting is largely done by a handful of campaign consultant groups including [Aristotle](#), CampaignGrid and Targeted Victory, which collect some of their data from direct marketing companies like Acxiom and Experian. The companies are reluctant to discuss which candidates are their clients, but according to a Federal Election Commission filing, [CampaignGrid](#) does work with the Ron Paul “super PAC,” Endorse Liberty.

The process for targeting a user with political messages takes three steps. The first two are common to any online marketing: a “cookie,” or digital marker, is dropped on a user’s computer after the user visits a Web site or makes a purchase, and that profile is matched with offline data like what charities a person supports, what type of credit card a person has and what type of car he or she drives. The political consultants then take a third step and match that data with voting records, including party registration and how often the person has voted in past election cycles, but not whom that person voted for.

Throughout the process, the targeted consumers are tagged with an alphanumeric code, removing their names and making the data anonymous. So while the campaigns are not aiming at consumers by name — only by the code — the effect is the same. Campaigns are able to aim at specific possible voters across the Web. Instead of buying an ad on, say, The Miami Herald Web site, a campaign can buy an audience.

Another advantage is that these ads can be bought quickly — using an auction process to obtain ad space — when campaigns need to move rapidly to aim at an audience, for example, to counter a bad debate performance or an unflattering newspaper article.

“If you can get in front of a news story, if you can help frame the debate rather than respond to the debate,” Mr. Anuzis said, “that makes a big difference.”

John Simpson, media director at [Blue State Digital](#), which worked with the Obama campaign in 2008, said bidding technology means strategists can “get a campaign up and running very fast and also potentially pull it down very fast.”

In 2009, Chris Christie, then a candidate for governor in New Jersey, worked with CampaignGrid to respond to [accusations](#) from Gov. Jon S. Corzine that he supported cutting health care coverage including mammograms. In response, Mr. Christie’s campaign quickly created a video ad showing him sitting at a kitchen table with his wife and telling the story of his mother’s struggle with breast cancer.

It was aimed at female Republican voters who were searching for information on breast cancer. “It’s awful for the governor to try to desperately hold on to power by scaring people,” Mr. Christie said at the end of the video.

Mike DuHaime, a partner at [Mercury Public Affairs](#) who ran Mr. Christie’s campaign, said of the ad: “I think the biggest thing in politics is just being able to move quickly. I don’t know if it won us the campaign, but it kept us from losing.”

When Gov. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana was running for re-election last year, his campaign used a number of ads with different messages. Blaise Hazelwood, the president of [Grassroots Targeting](#), the company that worked on Mr. Jindal’s campaign, said voter registration data was critical to the success of the digital campaign.

“We want to hit the people who can actually go out and vote,” Ms. Hazelwood said. The digital campaign ran in September and October, and the company placed ads online to reach registered Republicans as well as registered Democrats. There were more registered Democrats in the state, and early polling had shown that some were “favorable towards Jindal,” Ms. Hazelwood said.

Critics say that the ability to limit political messages to registered voters toes the line of social discrimination. Daniel Kreiss, an assistant professor at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, called some of the targeting techniques a form of political redlining.

“These practices, as they get more sophisticated, leave entire segments of the population out of the political communication of the campaign,” Professor Kreiss said, adding that “campaigns aren’t going to spend resources on people who aren’t seen as being important.”

Prof. Joseph Turow of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania said that ads aimed at registered voters, while efficient for the campaign, benefited the candidate in another way.

“Different people getting different ideas about a candidate maximize the chances that a person would agree with you.”

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Labor Leaders Plan Door-to-Door Effort for Obama



Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Richard Trumka, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. leader, and President Obama at the White House in August.

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

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As the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#) prepares to endorse President Obama on Tuesday, labor leaders say they will mount their biggest campaign effort, with far more union members than ever before — at least 400,000, they say — knocking on voters’ doors to counter the well-endowed “super PACs” backing Republicans.

The same Supreme Court ruling in 2010 that set the stage for these political action committees to accept unlimited donations also allowed unions to send their foot soldiers to visit not just union members at home, but also voters who do not belong to unions — a move expected to increase labor’s political clout significantly in this year’s elections.

Unions first used their expanded ability in a big way in Ohio last November to educate and mobilize both union and nonunion voters in a battle to repeal a law that curbed bargaining rights for Ohio’s teachers, firefighters and other public employees. Spurred by 17,000 union volunteers, labor won in a blowout, with Ohioans voting 62 percent to 38 percent to [repeal a law](#) that the Republican-dominated Legislature had enacted seven months earlier.

“That was a pretty big wake-up call to the Republican Party and also to the Democratic Party, because it showed what labor unions can do when they’re motivated and can reach out to voters across the board,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

With numerous super PACs expected to broadcast a flood of TV spots in support of the Republican nominee, the Obama campaign is looking to organized labor to play a major role in offsetting that. Labor leaders say they expect unions to spend \$400 million this year on national, state and local elections — including \$100 million by the [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](#) — but they say their ground troops, not money, is labor’s signal contribution.

Union officials assert that the elections this November, at the national and state levels, are vital to labor’s future because Republicans have made repeated efforts to undermine unions, whether through Wisconsin’s legislation to [curb public sector collective bargaining](#), Indiana’s [“right to work” law](#) or Congressional [efforts to weaken](#) the National Labor Relations Board.

Labor leaders voice confidence that they can rally millions of blue-collar voters behind President Obama in battleground states like Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

“Look at what we’ve already seen this year — the super PACs have spent tens of millions of dollars,” [Richard L. Trumka](#), the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s president, said in an interview. “We’re going to counter that by getting people out. We’ll never be able to match them with money.”

The [Service Employees International Union](#), with two million members, aims to mobilize 100,000 of its members this year — twice as many as in 2008 — to make phone calls and knock on doors.

“What’s different in our approach this year is massive investment in activating member volunteers,” said Brandon Davis, the service employees’ political director.

With unions representing 11.8 percent of all workers, labor volunteers canvassing in previous elections could often just knock on one in 10 doors. They might knock on a door and then have to walk two blocks to the next union household. But now they can knock on every door in a neighborhood.

“Their ability to be totally unified and focused on their message will make them ultimately the most decisive single player in the political landscape this year,” said Stephen J. Law, president of American Crossroads, a Republican super PAC whose founders include Karl Rove, President George W. Bush’s top political adviser. “Groups like us, we don’t have millions of members that we can readily deploy. We tend to be more active on the airwaves and mass communications.”

In Wisconsin and Ohio last year, Republican governors pushed through legislation to curb bargaining by public employees, a move they said was needed to balance their budgets. But labor leaders viewed those efforts as part of a nationwide Republican strategy to weaken unions, long among the G.O.P.’s most effective adversaries. In recent months, some 20,000 union volunteers

collected more than one million signatures to hold a vote to [recall Wisconsin's governor](#), Scott Walker, probably in the next few months.

“We’ve seen a systematic plan to go after Republican enemies,” said Michael Podhorzer, the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s political director. “They’ve clearly tried to weaken unions and drain our treasuries. But the consequence has been more like kicking a hornets’ nest than draining our resources.”

Union strategists predict that their expanded reach will make an important difference in angling this year for white working-class voters. Labor leaders say a strong voter education campaign may swing many in this group away from Mitt Romney, the expected Republican nominee, and toward Mr. Obama.

According to a 2008 Hart Research poll, white blue-collar men over all voted for John McCain over Mr. Obama by an 18-point margin, but, in large part because of unions’ politicking, white blue-collar men in unions backed Mr. Obama by a 23-point margin.

Mr. Law of American Crossroads agreed that much of this year’s campaign would focus on the white working class. “It’s a demographic that President Obama has significant vulnerability with,” he said.

Mr. Law said American Crossroads and its sister groups, which hope to raise \$300 million, are merely trying to keep up with organized labor’s war chest and ground troops. Some Republicans say labor’s campaign spending will exceed that of Republican super PACS.

“They’re lying,” said Gerald W. McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. “[Citizens United](#) will give them access to far more money than we have,” he said, referring to the 2010 Supreme Court decision.

The service employees will focus in part on voter registration and turnout in Hispanic neighborhoods (especially in Colorado, Florida and Nevada) and African-American neighborhoods (particularly in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.)

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. has created its own super PAC, Workers’ Voices, which plans to spend the \$3.7 million it has collected largely to finance labor’s efforts to reach out to nonunion voters.

“The concept was never to be a force on TV and try to match what Karl Rove and the Koch brothers can do, because that’s a fool’s errand,” said the A.F.L.-C.I.O.’s Mr. Podhorzer, referring to the billionaire industrialists and supporters of conservative causes. “We firmly believe that person-to-person contact moves the percentages our way.”

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Obama Campaign Banks on High-Tech Ground Game to Reach Voters



Michael F. McElroy for The New York Times

Clockwise from top left, Obama headquarters in Chillicothe; Former Gov. Ted Strickland of Ohio campaigning for Obama in Gallipolis; volunteers working in Chillicothe; and the African Americans for Obama campaign stand in Columbus.

By [JACKIE CALMES](#)

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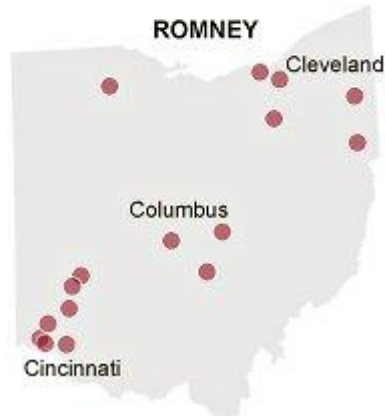
CHILLICOTHE, Ohio — A cheer erupted at about 8 on a June evening as a woman scrawled with red marker on paper taped to the wall: the small group in a storefront Obama campaign office in this Mayberry-like southern Ohio town had exceeded the night's goal of calling 700 voters with an hour to go, despite time out for a pep talk from a surprise visitor, former Gov. Ted Strickland.

Other volunteers entered information from the calls into computers — which voters would support [President Obama](#), which were undecided and why — thereby expanding the [VoteBuilder](#) database instantly accessible at his campaign's state headquarters in Columbus and at the national command center in Chicago. Much the same was happening in storefronts across the country, several hundred of them and growing.

These are the hubs connecting Mr. Obama’s grass-roots army and his field marshals in state and national headquarters, who constantly process the raw data to map their next moves. For all of the attention to television advertising, the Obama campaign has made an investment likely to

Mobilizing in Ohio

President Obama has 32 offices across the state, and Mitt Romney has 16, some of which share space in local G.O.P. offices. Both campaigns say they are planning to open more.



Source: The campaigns

THE NEW YORK TIMES

reach hundreds of millions of dollars — a gamble, really — in its ground game, with state-of-the-art technology for demographic data mining, consumer marketing, video production and social media, including the campaign’s own Dashboard social network to link, motivate and expand the ranks of volunteers.

The aim is to “break through the clutter,” as advisers say, of the hundreds of millions of dollars in negative television ads expected from Mitt Romney and the “[super PACs](#)” supporting him. The Obama campaign is trying to reconnect with the voters who turned out for him in 2008, find new supporters in groups likely to back him, target messages to them based on the issues that

concern them and get them to volunteer and to vote, preferably during early-voting periods before Election Day.

On paper, the idea is simple. Voters get a call, a visit or both from a volunteer who lives in their neighborhood. An unregistered resident gets help in signing up to vote. If the voter is undecided and cares most about, say, education, the campaign will make sure that voter gets e-mails about Mr. Obama's education policies, a heads-up the next time the president is going to be addressing the topic, and maybe even a ticket to his next event in the state. If the voter begins leaning toward Mr. Obama, the campaign will encourage early voting to lock up the support.

But in reality it can be a time-consuming and trying process, as Kathryn River has learned. When Mr. Romney began in May to organize in Ohio, the bellwether state of presidential elections, Ms. River, 25, already had been calling neighbors and going door to door for Mr. Obama for six months. She enlisted her mother, Susie Burke, 49, a pub owner and former Republican, who enters data that callers and door-knockers collect.

Ms. River recalled gingerly approaching one assigned address, where a burly, bearded man was leaning on his rifle. But, she said, after her pitch she "left feeling I'd swayed him a bit."

After more than three years of economic ups and downs and partisan brawling, the realities of governing have dimmed the Obama magic. "The excitement is still there because we're re-electing the first African-American president," said Jim Bennett, 57 (who, like the two dozen other volunteers here, is white). "But it just takes a little bit more this time around to get the volunteers to come out."

Getting them out is essential to Mr. Obama. While the president's re-election campaign is also advertising heavily — it spent \$29 million on advertising in key states last month — many in both parties expect that Mr. Romney and his allies will dominate on the airwaves. But Mr. Obama, the onetime community organizer, is banking on his ability to out-organize Mr. Romney in the states that will decide the outcome.

A candidate who expands the electorate by registering new voters, persuading the doubtful and moving the apathetic can add one to three percentage points to their total, strategists in both parties say. Obama advisers believe the advantage could be even bigger.

"In a close race that's going to be decided by a handful of points, I think the ground game can absolutely make the difference," said Mr. Strickland, who lost a bid for re-election in 2010 by two percentage points.

Ohio has 32 Obama field offices, the most of any state, with more planned in cities and rural towns, across its industrial north and the less friendly south and east: Appalachian Ohio, home to the sort of working-class white voters who have turned on Democrats in recent decades.

Mr. Romney has 16 "victory centers" in Ohio, some sharing space in local Republican Party offices. Six mobile call centers will circulate in rural areas.

Mr. Romney's national political director, Rich Beeson, said Democrats "are whistling past the graveyard if they think we're not going to have a significant get-out-the-vote effort in Ohio."

Republicans point to 2010, when they made big gains in Ohio, including Gov. John Kasich's victory over Mr. Strickland. But Democrats and unions rallied last November, overwhelmingly winning the repeal of Mr. Kasich's signature measure curbing labor rights.

"The election in 2010 made for more spirit now," said Jackie Thomas, a 58-year-old nurse who volunteers in an Obama field office near Cleveland.

Chris Redfern, the Ohio Democratic Party chairman, said he saw "a huge opportunity" for Democrats to recapture blue-collar voters from among police officers and firefighters angered by the Republicans' anti-union actions and budget cuts, and from an estimated 825,000 workers at auto plants and suppliers — one in eight voters — helped by the industry's rescue.

Like others, the Obama campaign's Chillicothe office is headed by a paid field organizer who recruits volunteers for neighborhood teams and picks a leader for each.

Mr. Bennett is one of four neighborhood team leaders, or "N.T.L.'s," for Ross County. Before leaving on the recent night, he logged onto Dashboard, which showed that all five core members of his "Team Ross South" had worked in the evening's phone bank, and he read six new messages — one from Jeremy Bird, the Obama campaign's national field director in Chicago, and five from Geoff Berman, its deputy national training director.

"You can't bluff your way through being a neighborhood team leader," said Aaron Pickrell, senior adviser for Mr. Obama's Ohio campaign. "Either the calls are being made or they're not. The doors are being knocked or they're not."

Mr. Pickrell spoke in a Columbus office as the field organizer interviewed a potential neighborhood team leader, gauging whether the man had the time and organizational skills necessary to build support, especially among swing voters.

"Independents are going to be hard, as they always are," he said. "But that's the whole point of this: we're going to talk to people individually about stuff they care about."

A version of this article appeared in print on June 27, 2012, on page A17 of the New York edition with the headline: Obama Campaign Banks on High-Tech Ground Game to Reach Voters.

Record Spending by Obama's Camp Shrinks Coffers

By [NICHOLAS CONFESSORE](#) and [JO CRAVEN MCGINTY](#)

Published: *The New York Times*, August 4, 2012, p. A1+

[President Obama](#) has spent more campaign cash more quickly than any incumbent in recent history, betting that heavy early investments in personnel, field offices and a high-tech campaign infrastructure will propel him to victory in November.

Since the beginning of last year, Mr. Obama and the Democrats have burned through millions of dollars to find and register voters. They have spent almost \$50 million subsidizing Democratic state parties to hire workers, pay for cellphones and update voter lists. They have spent tens of millions of dollars on polling, online advertising and software development to turn Mr. Obama's fallow volunteers corps into a grass-roots army.

The price tag: about \$400 million from the beginning of last year to June 30 this year, according to a New York Times analysis of [Federal Election Commission](#) records, including \$86 million on advertising.

But now Mr. Obama's big-dollar bet is being tested. With less than a month to go before the national party conventions begin, the president's once commanding cash advantage has evaporated, leaving [Mitt Romney](#) and the Republican National Committee with about \$25 million more cash on hand than the Democrats as of the beginning of July.

Despite Mr. Obama's multimillion-dollar advertising barrage against Mr. Romney, he is now being outspent on the airwaves with Mr. Romney benefiting from a deluge of spending by conservative "[super PACs](#)" and outside groups. While Mr. Romney has depleted much of his funds from the nominating contest, he is four weeks away from being able to tap into tens of millions of dollars in general election money. And many polls show the race to be very close.

Mr. Obama's cash needs — he spent \$70.8 million in June alone, more than half on advertising and far more than he raised — have brought new urgency to his campaign's fund-raising efforts. His advisers have had to schedule more fund-raising trips than originally planned to big-money states like New York, according to donors involved in the effort. The super PAC supporting his campaign, Priorities USA Action, is enlisting former President Bill Clinton as a rainmaker, hoping to counter its conservative counterparts.

While Mr. Obama will also have access to general election money in September, he is unlikely to have the same spending advantage over Mr. Romney as he had during the primary season, when Mr. Romney spent much of his money battling Republican rivals.

And with August a traditionally slow month for fund-raising, Mr. Obama has bombarded his supporters in recent weeks with increasingly urgent pleas for money, mindful that he will need to

drastically raise his cash intake in the coming months merely to equal his record-breaking haul from 2008.

“My upcoming birthday next week could be the last one I celebrate as president of the United States, but that’s not up to me — it’s up to you,” Mr. Obama wrote last week as the campaign’s latest fund-raising deadline and his Aug. 4 birthday approached. “This July deadline is our most urgent yet, coming after two consecutive months of being significantly outraised by Romney and the Republicans.”

Mr. Obama’s heavy expenditures — and his campaign’s pressure on bundlers to find and groom new donors — have stirred worries among other Democrats, who have long taken Mr. Obama’s financial supremacy for granted.

“There is a lot of worry that Romney’s folks are raising so much more,” said one of Mr. Obama’s top fund-raisers, who did not want to be identified as discussing internal campaign business. “I just don’t think there’s a lot of high-dollar money left on the table.”

In fact, Republicans insist that Mr. Obama will rue his spending.

“Heading into the final laps of the campaign, the Democrats will regret squandering so much of their haul early in the cycle on massive monthly overhead,” said Sean M. Spicer, a spokesman for the R.N.C.

But in interviews, party and campaign officials defended the approach of spending money to build out the campaign, saying they believed that the wisdom of Mr. Obama’s strategy would be demonstrated at the voting booth in November.

“The earlier the better,” said Adam Fetcher, an Obama campaign spokesman. “Starting a conversation with a persuadable voter months before Election Day allows us to be more effective in responding to that voter’s priorities than if they first hear from us a few weeks out. Building and maintaining our grass-roots foundation takes time and resources, but we believe those early investments will make a difference.”

But grass-roots movements do not come cheap.

Through June 30, Mr. Obama and the Democratic National Committee had spent \$46 million on direct mail and postage, according to F.E.C. records. Legal fees added up to \$3 million, while \$25,000 went to flower arrangements. Phones and telemarketing have eaten up at least \$24 million, and Internet advertising \$36 million, part of a sophisticated effort to try out different fund-raising appeals, test attacks on Mr. Romney and reach small donors. The campaign reached two million total donors in May, a campaign official said, a tally it did not reach until August during the 2008 election cycle.

Mindful that the [recession](#) has displaced many people who voted for Mr. Obama in 2008, especially those with low incomes, the campaign has also invested heavily in voter registration. That has paid dividends in states like Nevada, where Democrats have steadily expanded their

registration advantage over Republicans in recent months. In Ohio, the early deployment of money and a field staff last year also allowed the campaign to help Democrats fight a Republican-led effort to restrict early voting in the state.

The campaign has opened field offices far earlier than past campaigns in swing communities around the country, hiring people to train volunteers, find pockets of Democrats and identify voters who might be persuaded to vote for Mr. Obama in November. With staff members in virtually every state, the Obama campaign and the D.N.C. have spent \$52 million on payroll and benefits since the beginning of last year, along with \$5 million for rent.

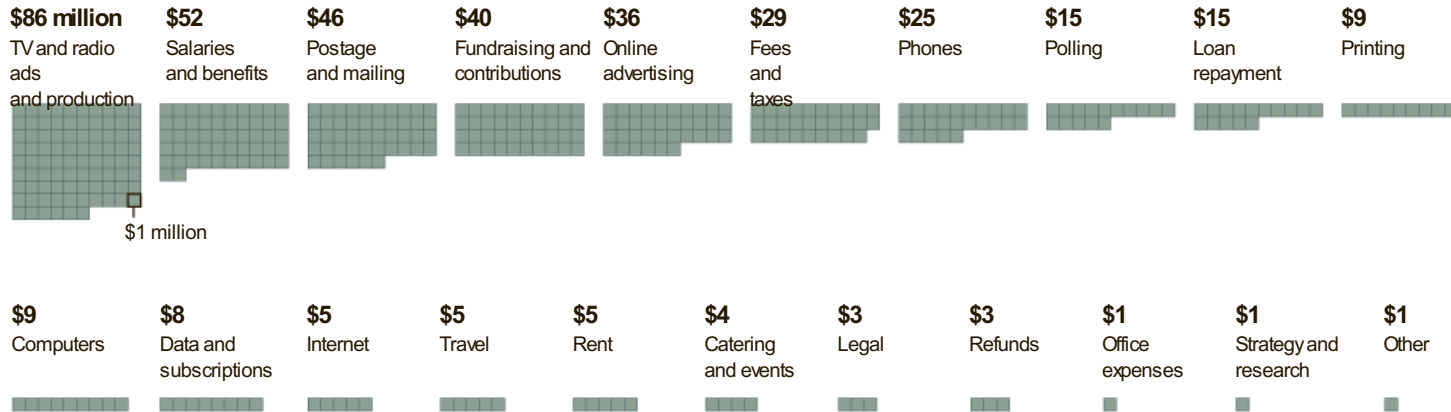
In the bellwether city of Chillicothe, Ohio, Mr. Obama's team opened a field office eight months earlier than it did during the 2008 cycle, a party official said on Thursday, allowing the campaign to spend far longer courting those voters still on the fence.

“You can pay for direct mail or TV ads at the last minute, but you can't shortcut long-term volunteer training programs,” said the official, who was granted anonymity to discuss the campaign's spending strategy. “The relationships we've built, the depth of what people know about their communities, our data systems, the training and organization — good luck doing that in less than 100 days.”

Kitty Bennett and Derek Willis contributed reporting.

Financing a Race

Where the roughly \$400 million spent by the Obama campaign and the Democratic National Committee since the beginning of last year has gone:



Relaxed and Loose, Candidate Obama Hits His Mark



Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

Obama in Ohio President Obama spoke with Steven DeBusk, a college student who introduced him at a Bexley, Ohio, rally last week.

By [HELENE COOPER](#)

Published: *The New York Times*, August 27, 2012

BEXLEY, Ohio — During his three-minute chat on Tuesday with the man introducing him to 3,300 supporters at a campaign rally here, [President Obama](#) achieved four must-dos in every politician's instruction manual.

An Obama Rally

INTRODUCTORY SONG "City of Blinding Lights," by U2

AVERAGE SPEECH TIME 27 minutes

AVERAGE CROWD SIZE 3,000

COMMONLY USED WORDS Economy, middle-class, wealthy, rich, families

APPEAL TO BASE “They have tried to sell us this trickle-down fairy dust before.”
(Occasionally substitutes “snake oil” for “fairy dust.”)

ATTACK LINE “That’s what he said about wind power — you can’t drive a car with a windmill on it. I mean, maybe he’s tried it; he’s put other things on the roof.”

CLOSING SONG “We Take Care of Our Own,” by Bruce Springsteen

Earlier, he made a surprise stop at a diner.

Display Familiarity: “Steven!” Mr. Obama called out, striding into the holding room where a nervous Steven DeBusk, 26, awaited, clutching his opening remarks. “You’re a BMX cyclist? I’ve been watching those guys on TV during the Olympics.”

Display Arcane Knowledge: After Mr. DeBusk said that he does not race around the track like in the Olympics (although he has, he said, learned to fall on his shoulder instead of his rump), Mr. Obama nodded. “Yeah, you ride freestyle,” he said, stunning the [Capital University](#) senior with his apparent knowledge of the difference between street BMX and the track runs.

Use Available Prop: Seconds later, Mr. Obama turned to his body man, Marvin Nicholson. During the Olympics, “they were falling all over the place, weren’t they?” Mr. Obama said. Mr. Nicholson nodded vigorously.

Show You’ve Paid Attention: Exactly 2 minutes and 53 seconds into the interchange, Mr. Obama was patting Mr. DeBusk on the back and showing him out the door. “Break a shoulder!” Mr. Obama said.

It is campaign season, and [Barack Obama](#) is on. He is relaxed. His squeamishness about edgy partisanship is long gone. And he does not start late or run over.

In Bexley, he jogged onstage exactly on schedule with “[City of Blinding Lights](#)” by U2 playing and the ecstatic crowd cheering. “Hello, Crusaders!” he shouted, using the name of the university’s sports team. If his remarks are supposed to start at 1 p.m., then at 1 p.m. they will start. A week ago in New Hampshire, he even started 54 minutes early.

In a re-election campaign in which his mostly multiracial crowds are smaller than in 2008 (he is no longer the fresh new face, and the Secret Service frowns on those 100,000-plus throngs), Mr. Obama is a scheduler’s dream, a walking, talking, handshaking, baby-hugging prototype of campaign efficiency. He takes less than a second to shake a hand and in 10 seconds can polish off seven greetings.

For the woman with a blond wig, false eyelashes and bright pink lipstick? A pat on the shoulder. Excited tween in a pink Obama T-shirt? A smile. Two giggling, beaming women, waving a camera phone? The president put an arm around each and flashed a grin at the lens.

Sometimes that efficiency punctures a crowd's euphoria. After waiting for hours to see Mr. Obama, crowds almost always greet him with fever-pitch cheers. And, every time, instead of riding the mood with a big opener, Mr. Obama lets out some air with a long list of acknowledgments of local politicians in the hall.

"You've got your own attorney general, Tom Miller, in the house," he said in Waterloo, Iowa, two weeks ago, immediately quieting the crowd, which had been hooting and hollering. "Congressman Bruce Braley is here," he said as the applause got even more tepid.

After deflating the crowd, Mr. Obama starts cranking it up again. He begins by assuming the persona of wherever he happens to be, inserting place-specific asides.

In New Hampshire last weekend, he was suddenly Mr. New England. "Thank you for returning Malia and Sasha safe and sound," Mr. Obama said. "They were up here for camp for a month."

In Iowa two weeks ago, the president became Joe Six-Pack, talking about beer at every stop. "Pork chop and beer," he reported proudly to the crowd in Dubuque when asked by the first lady, Michelle Obama, what he had eaten at the Iowa State Fair. At a coffee shop in Knoxville, the president chatted with a man about how he had installed a brewery at the White House, and, oh, just happened to have a few bottles of the home-brew back on his bus. Then he sent someone to Ground Force One to get the man a bottle.

On the Capital University campus in Bexley on Tuesday, the president of the most powerful country on earth transformed into the graduate plagued by [student loans](#). "We did not finish paying off our student loans until about eight years ago," he told the crowd of students, talking about how he and Mrs. Obama graduated from college with "a mountain of debt."

Anyone who follows politics could see what was coming from a mile away, and Mr. Obama delivered. "Governor Romney said, if you want to go to college or start a business, you can just — and I'm quoting here — 'borrow money if you have to from your parents.'" The audience, of course, booed. Mr. Obama was not done. "Not everybody has parents who have the money to lend. That may be news to some folks, but it's the truth."

By the speech's end, he was emoting into the microphone like a preacher. "If you're willing to stand with me, and vote for me, and organize with me, and knock on doors and make phone calls with me, we will finish what we started. We will win Ohio. We will win this election. And we will remind the world why the United States of America is the greatest nation on earth!"

He's done. Right on schedule, at 1:27 p.m. The Bruce Springsteen song "We Take Care of Our Own" is playing, and Mr. Obama is plunging into the rope line, grabbing the frantic hands stretched his way. He will shake hands and kiss babies and pose for photos for precisely six and a half minutes, through the Springsteen anthem and halfway into the Brooks & Dunn tune "Only in America."

By the time the country duo sing about the "sun going down on an L.A. freeway," Mr. Obama is headed out the door.

On to the next event.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 27, 2012, on page A7 of the New York edition with the headline: Two Campaigns With Styles as Similar as Red and Blue: Relaxed and Loose, Candidate Obama Hits His Mark.

G.O.P. Packaging Seeks to Reveal a Warm Romney



Edward Linsmier for The New York Times

The Romney campaign wants the main stage for the Republican convention in Tampa, Fla., to convey warmth and openness.

By [JEREMY W. PETERS](#)

Published: ~~The New York Times~~, August 20, 2012, pA1+

TAMPA, Fla. — They hail from the Broadway stage, the control rooms of NBC and the design studios that created sleek sets for Oprah Winfrey and Jon Stewart.

Their craft is slick packaging and eye candy that audiences consume by the millions.

Their latest project? Selling the [Mitt Romney](#) story in prime time.

Working from makeshift offices at a hockey arena here, a team of Romney advisers, producers and designers has been staging and scripting a program for the [Republican National Convention](#) that they say they hope will accomplish something a year of campaigning has failed to do: paint a full and revealing portrait of who Mitt Romney is.

Instead of glossing over Mr. Romney's career as a private equity executive, they will highlight it in convention videos and speeches as the kind of experience that has prepared him to be the economic steward the country needs.

And rather than shy away from Mr. Romney's faith, as some campaign aides have argued he should, they have decided to embrace it. On the night Mr. Romney will address the convention, a member of the Mormon Church will deliver the invocation. On Sunday, this new approach was apparent as Mr. Romney invited reporters to join him at church services.

The campaign aides are determined to overcome perceptions that Mr. Romney is stiff, aloof and distant. So they have built [one of the most intricate set pieces](#) ever designed for a convention — a \$2.5 million Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired theatrical stage. From its dark-wood finish to the brightly glowing high-resolution screens in the rafters that look like skylights, every aspect of the stage has been designed to convey warmth, approachability and openness.

Conventions no longer command the kind of public attention they once did, and their very slickness can conspire against addressing the kinds of perception problems Mr. Romney faces. So one recent morning as Mr. Romney's image makers — a team that includes many people who have never worked on a political convention before — scurried around on the sawdust-covered floor of the [Tampa Bay Times Forum](#), they said an essential part of conveying who their candidate is will depend on making the four days of programming feel nothing like a convention at all.

“Usually the convention is so straight and staid and symmetrical, even-Steven,” said [Eddie Knasiak](#), one of the convention co-designers whose credits include projects for Ms. Winfrey, Martha Stewart and MTV. “We were conscious of trying to make it not seem grandiose. We wanted it to seem inclusive, warm. It's not like anything you've seen at a convention before.”

The convention hall will have two musical stages — one for surprise acts and another for the house band, which will be led by G. E. Smith, the former musical director for “Saturday Night Live” and guitarist for Hall & Oates.

To serve as executive producer, the [Republican Party](#) brought in Phil Alongi, a former politics producer with NBC News. Mr. Alongi has helped the Romney campaign fine-tune its programming so it fits neatly into the tight, one-hour block that the broadcast networks have dedicated to airing the convention in prime time. He has advised them on how to avoid certain pet peeves of producers, like running long at the top or bottom of the hour, when the networks have to cut away for commercial breaks.

Mr. Alongi, with his knowledge of what cameramen and producers will be looking for, has also ensured that Republican Party branding is placed in camera lines of sight. “When they're flipping through the channels at home, I want them to know this is the Republican National Convention,” he said.

The most ambitious element of stagecraft, however, will be the podium — which features 13 different video screens — the largest about 29 feet by 12 feet, the smallest about 8 feet by 8 feet and movable. All the screens will be framed in dark wood.

“Even the frames are designed to give it a sense that you're not looking at a stage, you're looking into someone's living room,” said Russ Schriefer, one of Mr. Romney's senior advisers who is running the convention planning for the campaign.

From the six-foot-high podium, staircases slope into the audience. The intended symbolism: Mr. Romney is open and approachable, not distant and far above.

Along with other props — including a digital clock mounted to one of the arena’s upper rings that will show the [national debt](#) ticking ever-higher — the video screens will help augment whatever messages a speaker is trying to convey, be it images of woeful-looking Americans to convey that President Obama has mismanaged the economy or pictures of the Romney children that speak to the candidate’s deep bonds with his family.

Mr. Romney, who as the planner for the Salt Lake City Olympics has experience coordinating large-scale events, has had a direct hand in shaping some major aspects of the convention, from the podium design to the theme, “A Better Future,” which he personally approved.

When his aides showed him an early proposal for the set, a more modern stage with features like steps that would light up, he told them to go back to the drawing board.

How to approach his religion, a topic that he usually avoids speaking about beyond the most general terms, is a question that has long divided his campaign staff. But in the end, they decided to confront it head on. In addition to the invocation, Mr. Romney’s work as a bishop in the Mormon Church will be on display.

Despite concerns that his religion might alienate evangelicals and other conservatives, Mr. Romney and his advisers hope that his faith ultimately will be seen as a sign of strength of character, and his time as bishop as an example of his willingness to serve when called.

There is still the question of whether four nights of slickly produced biographical videos, elaborate staging and gushing speeches can change the dynamics of the presidential campaign or alter impressions of a man who has been a national figure for most of the last decade.

Still, Mr. Romney’s advisers see it as a chance at a fresh start.

“This is an opportunity for us to tell the Mitt Romney story in a way that people might not have seen,” Mr. Schriefer said. “This is our chance to lay out the arguments for why Barack Obama has failed and why Mitt Romney would do better, and to do that using a platform where 39 million people tune in to hear him speak, a lot of them for the first time.”

In Early Voting States, Getting Out the Vote is Starting Now

The New York Times National Edition, September 28, 2012, A1, A14

By [JEFF ZELENY](#)

DES MOINES — A stream of voters arrived at election offices across Iowa to cast their ballots. Waves of absentee ballots have started landing in mailboxes in 30 other states. And more than a month before what the calendar says is Election Day, President Obama began delivering his closing argument to voters.

The rise of early voting, which got under way here on Thursday, is changing the rhythms of how Americans elect their presidents. The president is not as fixated on winning more votes than Mitt Romney on Election Day, but on executing a plan to accrue more votes over the next 40 days.

For millions of Americans, the election is no longer on a fixed date. It is increasingly becoming another item on the fall checklist, a civic duty steeped in the convenience of everyday life. The development is reshaping campaigns, with Election Day becoming Election Month for as much as 40 percent of the electorate this year, including voters in the vital swing states of Ohio, Florida, Colorado and others.

“It has made the October surprises way less relevant,” said Jim Messina, the campaign manager for Mr. Obama, who has built the president’s re-election strategy around the growing trend of voting early. One example: a two-minute ad that began running Thursday summing up Mr. Obama’s case for re-election. “In a close election, you can increase your number of voters in a very important way.”

The president opened his campaign speeches this week with a pitch for early voting, imploring Ohio voters, “I need you to start voting six days from now.” It was a not-so-subtle effort to bottle his early success and capitalize on what several polls find is an edge over Mr. Romney in swing states, which could shrink as the remainder of the race unfolds, with the first debate next Wednesday.

As the bell tolled eight from the clock tower of the Polk County Courthouse on Thursday, signaling the moment when the polls here would open, a line stretched down the street from the election office. A subject of conversation among those waiting was a statistic from 2008: Mr. Obama received fewer votes than Senator John McCain on Election Day in Iowa and some other states, but Mr. Obama won those states because his plan was built around a month of voting, not a day.

Early Voting in Tossup States

In 2008, more than 30 percent of all votes were cast before Election Day either by mail or in person, and the percentage is expected to be higher this year.

START DATE	STATES	PERCENTAGE OF EARLY VOTES IN 2008
SEPT. 27	Iowa	36%
OCT. 2	Ohio	30
OCT. 18	North Carolina	61
OCT. 20	Nevada	67
OCT. 22	Colorado	79
	Wisconsin	21
OCT. 27	Florida	52
None*	Virginia	14
	New Hampshire	10

*In 15 states, including Virginia and New Hampshire, it is possible to vote early only by applying for an absentee ballot with a valid excuse.

The New York Times

The rise of early voting, [which is allowed with few restrictions](#) in 32 states and the District of Columbia, has opened a new front in efforts to maximize turnout and find voters through exhaustive micro-targeting. An open question, though, is whether making voting more convenient will mean that more people actually take part in the presidential election.

An Iowa law, which national election observers say is the only one of its kind in the country, allows a campaign to gather 100 signatures and petition election officials to create a temporary voting location aimed at serving a particular constituency.

Here in Des Moines, Democrats requested that a voting site be opened Oct. 20 at La Tapatia Tienda Mexicana, a restaurant. Republicans requested a site be opened on the same day at Johnston Evangelical Free Church. Election officials granted both requests, along with those for voting sites at libraries, grocery stores and community centers.

When Michelle Obama visits the University of Northern Iowa on Friday, her chief task will not be simply to deliver a speech. She will ask supporters to cast their ballots on the spot, a few steps away at a voting site requested by the campaign and approved by election officials.

While some people will vote in person, even more will do so by mail. The Iowa Secretary of State's office said Democrats had a 5-to-1 edge over Republicans in the numbers of absentee ballots requested statewide — largely because of efforts by the Obama campaign — but Republicans said the numbers would level out over the next five weeks.

“We are going to close that gap in Iowa,” said Rick Wiley, political director of the Republican National Committee, which is overseeing early-voting efforts as part of its national field program. He added, “In years past, we were slow to embrace it, but it’s foolish not to.”

The proportion of people nationwide casting early ballots climbed from 23 percent in 2004 to 31 percent in 2008, according to Michael McDonald, who studies early voting at George Mason University. This year, party strategists estimate that up to 40 percent of voters will cast ballots before Nov. 6, but the proportion is far higher in many battleground states.



Scott Olson/Getty Images/Early

voting started Thursday for residents of Waterloo, Iowa.

In Florida, North Carolina, Colorado and Nevada, advisers to both campaigns say as many as 70 percent of ballots will be cast before Nov. 6. And in Ohio, Wisconsin and Iowa, the campaigns estimate at least 30 percent of people will vote early. Virginia and New Hampshire are the only battleground states without widespread, no-excuse early voting.

Republican officials in several states acknowledge that the Obama campaign may start with a slight advantage in early voting because Democrats have grown more accustomed to casting their ballots early. To level the playing field, the Republican secretary of state in Ohio sent absentee ballot requests to every registered voter in the state.

Tom Zawistowski, president of the Ohio Liberty Coalition, a group affiliated with the [Tea Party](#), sent a message to encourage members to consider voting early. He wrote, “I know we do not like absentee voting or early voting at all, but it is a key part of our election equation now and we need to understand how to use it to our advantage just like the other side does.”

Here in Des Moines, the line slowed to a trickle after a few hours on Thursday morning, but the real burst of voting will come when absentee ballots start arriving by mail as early as Friday in voters' mailboxes. The Obama campaign is deploying hundreds of field organizers and volunteers this weekend to "chase ballots," or return envelopes to county election offices. The Republican Party here is sending a mailing to all of its voters, urging them to request an absentee ballot and vote before Election Day.

As Nancy Bobo, 60, stood with other Obama supporters, she wondered aloud where the supporters of Mr. Romney were.

"I don't see them," she said with a smile. "But we're not taking anything for granted. We still have 40 days to go. You never know; things can change on a dime."

But in the northwest corner of Iowa, more than 200 miles away in the town of Orange City, Gert Kooi, 76, was among those voting for Mr. Romney on Thursday.

"I voted today because we might not be here on Election Day, and my mind is long made up," Ms. Kooi said in an interview. She added, "We just don't care for Obama here."

Jennifer Steinhauer contributed reporting from Orange City, Iowa.