

## How a Race in the Balance Went to Obama



Doug Mills/The New York Times

President Obama, with his family, returned to the White House on Wednesday, after a bruising re-election fight with many twists and turns.

By ADAM NAGOURNEY, ASHLEY PARKER, JIM RUTENBERG and JEFF ZELENY

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Seven minutes into the first [presidential debate](#), the mood turned from tense to grim inside the room at the University of Denver where Obama staff members were following the encounter. Top aides monitoring focus groups — voters who registered their minute-by-minute reactions with the turn of a dial — watched as enthusiasm for [Mitt Romney](#) spiked. “We are getting bombed on Twitter,” announced Stephanie Cutter, a deputy campaign manager, while tracking the early postings by political analysts and journalists whom the Obama campaign viewed as critical in setting debate perceptions.

By the time [President Obama](#) had waded through a convoluted answer about health care — “He’s not mentioning voucher-care?” someone called out — a pall had fallen over the room. When the president closed by declaring, “This was a terrific debate,” his re-election team grimaced. There was the obligatory huddle to discuss how to explain his performance to the nation, and then a moment of paralysis: No one wanted to go to the spin room and speak with reporters.

Mr. Romney’s advisers monitored the debate up the hall from the Obama team, as well as at campaign headquarters in Boston. Giddy smiles flashed across their faces as their focus groups showed the same results.

“Boy, the president is off tonight,” said Stuart Stevens, the senior Romney strategist, sounding mystified, according to aides in the room. Russ Schriefer, a senior adviser, immediately began planning television spots based entirely on clips from the debate. As it drew to a close, Gail Gitcho, Mr. Romney’s communications director in Boston, warned surrogates heading out to television studios: “No chest thumping.”

The Oct. 3 debate sharply exposed Mr. Obama’s vulnerabilities and forced the president and his advisers to work to reclaim the campaign over a grueling 30 days, ending with his triumph on Tuesday. After a summer of growing confidence, Mr. Obama suddenly confronted the possibility of a loss that would diminish his legacy and threaten his signature achievement, the [health care law](#). He emerged newly combative, newly contrite and newly willing to recognize how his disdain for Mr. Romney had blinded him to his opponent’s strengths and ability to inflict damage.

After watching a videotape of his debate performance, Mr. Obama began calling panicked donors and supporters to reassure them he would do better. “This is on me,” the president said, again and again.

Mr. Obama, who had dismissed warnings about being caught off guard in the debate, told his advisers that he would now accept and deploy the prewritten attack lines that he had sniffed at earlier. “If I give up a couple of points of likability and come across as snarky, so be it,” Mr. Obama told his staff.

As his campaign began an all-out assault on Mr. Romney’s credibility and conservative views, the president soon was denouncing Mr. Romney’s budget proposals as a “sketchy deal” and charging that the Republican nominee was not telling Americans the truth.

Mr. Obama recognized that to a certain extent, he had walked into a trap that Mr. Romney’s advisers had anticipated: His antipathy toward Mr. Romney — which advisers described as deeper than what Mr. Obama had felt for John McCain in 2008 — led the incumbent to underestimate his opponent as he began moving to the center before the debate audience of millions of television viewers.

But as concerned as the White House was during the last 30 days of the campaign, its polls never showed Mr. Obama slipping behind Mr. Romney, aides said. The president was helped in no small part by the tremendous amount of money the campaign built up, which had permitted him to pound his Republican rival before he had ever had a chance to fully introduce himself to the nation.

That was just one of several ways that Mr. Obama's campaign operations, some unnoticed by Mr. Romney's aides in Boston, helped save the president's candidacy. In Chicago, the campaign recruited a team of behavioral scientists to build an extraordinarily sophisticated database packed with names of millions of undecided voters and potential supporters. The ever-expanding list let the campaign find and register new voters who fit the demographic pattern of Obama backers and methodically track their views through thousands of telephone calls every night.

That allowed the Obama campaign not only to alter the very nature of the electorate, making it younger and less white, but also to create a portrait of shifting voter allegiances. The power of this operation stunned Mr. Romney's aides on election night, as they saw voters they never even knew existed turn out in places like Osceola County, Fla. "It's one thing to say you are going to do it; it's another thing to actually get out there and do it," said Brian Jones, a senior adviser.

In the last days of the campaign, Mr. Romney cast himself as the candidate that he may have wanted to be all along: moderate in tone, an agent of change who promised to bring bipartisan cooperation back to Washington, sounding very much like Barack Obama in 2008.

But he could never overcome the harm that Mr. Obama's advertising had done over the summer or the weight of the ideological baggage he carried from the primary. On Tuesday night, a crestfallen Mr. Romney and his family watched as the television networks showed him losing all but one battleground state.

Even as the networks declared Mr. Obama the winner, Mr. Romney, who had earlier told reporters he had written only a victory speech, paused before the walk downstairs from his hotel room in Boston. It was 11:30 p.m., and Romney field teams in Ohio, Virginia and Florida called in, saying the race was too close for the candidate to give up. At least four planes were ready to go, and aides had bags packed for recount battles in narrowly divided states. Bob White, a close Romney friend and adviser, was prepared to tell the waiting crowd that Mr. Romney would not yet concede.

But then, Mr. Romney quietly decided it was over. "It's not going to happen," he said.

As Ann Romney cried softly, he headed down to deliver his speech, ending his second, and presumably last, bid for the White House. Four decades earlier, his father and inspiration, George Romney, a former Michigan governor failed in his own such quest.

By the end of the 30 days, after [Air Force One](#) carried Mr. Obama on an almost round-the-clock series of rallies, the president had reverted back to the agent of change battling the forces of the status quo, drawing contrasts between himself and Mr. Romney with an urgency that had been absent earlier in the race. Mr. Obama had returned, if not to the candidate that he was in 2008, as a man hungry for four more years to pursue his agenda in the White House.

### **A Difficult September**

As the summer came to a close, the Romney campaign was stuck in a tense debate over how to rescue a struggling candidacy. On some nights, it did not even bother with the daily tracking poll. Why waste money on more bad news? Mr. Obama's attack on Mr. Romney's role at Bain Capital, the private equity firm he founded, was in full swing, the Democratic convention had been an unequivocal boost for the president, and a videotape had surfaced that caught Mr. Romney at a private fund-raiser saying that 47 percent of the nation did not pay taxes, a line that reinforced Democrats' efforts to portray him as an out-of-touch elitist.

"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 our data. It was grim."

There was, advisers decided, one last opportunity on the horizon: the presidential debate in Denver.

Mr. Stevens argued that Mr. Obama's dislike of Mr. Romney would lead the president to underestimate him. "They think there's something intellectually inferior there," he said later. Mr. Romney's advisers also believed that Mr. Obama had demonized Mr. Romney to such an extent that their candidate would benefit when judged against the caricature.

In August, Mr. Romney began testing out one-liners on friends flying with him on his campaign plane. On issue after issue, Mr. Romney led discussions on how to frame his answers, to move away from the conservative tone of his primary contests in front of the largest audience he would have as a candidate.

Senator Rob Portman of Ohio was recruited to play Mr. Obama, and he embraced the role, even anticipating how the president would open his first debate, which fell on his wedding anniversary. "I've got to tell you, tonight's a really special night," Mr. Portman said, playing Mr. Obama. "I see my sweetie out there, boy, 20 years ago."

(Mr. Romney's advisers broke out in laughter when the real Mr. Obama opened with a similar line, and nodded approvingly when a very prepared Mr. Romney countered with a gracious response that even Democrats said put Mr. Obama off balance.)

Nothing had been left to chance: Mr. Romney put on full makeup and did his final practice in a room set up to replicate, down to the lighting and temperature, the hall where he would meet Mr. Obama.

On the Sunday before the debate, a group of top advisers and elected Republican officials from across the country, calling themselves the War Council, gathered in Boston to reassure Mr. Romney after his rough month — essentially saying “this is a place in the race, but it isn't a destiny” as Beth Myers, a senior adviser, put it — and to boost his confidence. George W. Bush phoned Mr. Romney, too. Pointing to his own history, he predicted that Mr. Obama would fumble, according to aides.

Democrats advising Mr. Obama saw the same peril for the president in the first debate that Mr. Romney's aides did. Ronald A. Klain, a Democratic strategist who has overseen debate preparation for presidential candidates for nearly 20 years, warned Mr. Obama at his very first debate session, a PowerPoint presentation in the Roosevelt Room on a sweltering day in mid-July, that incumbent presidents almost invariably lose their first debate.

“It's easier for a candidate to schedule the time to prepare; it's easy for the challenger to get away; the president has competing needs,” Mr. Klain told Mr. Obama, according to aides who witnessed the exchange.

Ken Mehlman, who had managed Mr. Bush's re-election campaign in 2004, ran into one of Mr. Obama's advisers at a party, and warned him that presidents are not used to being challenged, and unlike candidates, are out of practice at verbal jousting. Mr. Romney had gone through 20 debates over the past year.

Mr. Obama showed no interest in watching the Republican debates. But his aides studied them closely, and concluded that Mr. Romney was a powerful debater, hard to intimidate and fast to throw out assertions that would later prove wrong or exaggerated. At one debate, Gov. Rick Perry of Texas criticized Mr. Romney for having praised Arne Duncan, the education secretary, days earlier. Mr. Romney flatly denied it, leaving Mr. Perry speechless.

At the White House, Mr. Obama's communications director, Dan Pfeiffer, took note of that moment, intending to mention it to Mr. Obama. He would later fault himself for failing to fully understand “the magnitude of the challenge” Mr. Romney's debate style presented.

Mr. Obama displayed little concern. When he went to a resort outside Las Vegas for several days of debate preparation in September, his impatience with the exercise was evident when he escaped for an excursion to the Hoover Dam.

Mr. Klain and David Axelrod, a senior strategist, told Mr. Obama that he seemed distracted, but he shrugged them off. "I'll be there on game day," he said. "I'm a game day player."

Shortly after the debate began, Mr. Obama's aides realized they had made their own mistakes in advising Mr. Obama to avoid combative exchanges that might sacrifice the good will many Americans felt toward him. In Mr. Obama's mock debates with Senator John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat, Mr. Kerry drew Mr. Obama into a series of intense exchanges, and Mr. Axelrod decided that they were damaging to the president.

In 90 minutes, Mr. Obama crystallized what had been gnawing concerns among many Americans about the president. He came across, as Mr. Obama's advisers told him over the next few days, as professorial, arrogant, entitled and detached from the turmoil tearing the nation. He appeared to be disdainful not only of his opponent but also of the political process itself. Mr. Obama showed no passion for the job, and allowed Mr. Romney to explode the characterization of him as a wealthy, job-destroying venture capitalist that the Obama campaign had spent months creating.

The voter-analysis database back in Chicago noted a precipitous drop in perceptions of Mr. Obama among independent voters, starting that night and lasting for four days, long before the public polls picked it up. Voters who had begun turning to Mr. Obama were newly willing to give Mr. Romney another look.

What was arguably the most dismal night of Mr. Obama's political career could hardly have come at a worse time: Early voting was already under way in some states. Absentee ballots were on voters' coffee tables that very night.

After the debate, Mr. Obama called Mr. Axelrod on his way back to the hotel room. He had read the early reviews on his iPad.

"I guess the consensus is that we didn't have a very good night," Mr. Obama told Mr. Axelrod.

"That is the consensus," Mr. Axelrod said.

For the next 30 days, Mr. Romney and his advisers tried to capitalize on Mr. Obama's mistakes. And Mr. Romney continued his drift toward the center, softening his language on abortion and [immigration](#) from the positions that had defined him during the Republican

primaries. It was something that the White House had expected he would do. Perhaps most important, the debate gave him a swagger, confidence and presidential bearing that had been absent.

Mr. Romney soon recognized the scope of his accomplishment. He flew from Denver to Virginia for a rally the next day, and as the motorcade headed toward the event, there was so much traffic that Mr. Romney and his top advisers thought there must have been an accident. In fact, the roads were jammed with people on their way to see him.

### **A Storm's Effect**

It was clear that [Hurricane Sandy](#) was going to upend Mr. Obama's final week of campaigning, but aides in Chicago were determined to squeeze in one more visit to Florida. It almost became a calamity.

To get ahead of the storm, the president flew to Orlando on Oct. 28, the evening before a morning event. But overnight, the storm intensified and accelerated. Well before dawn, the Air Force One crew told the president's advisers that if he was going to beat the storm back to Washington, he had to leave at once. His aides blanched at the image of Mr. Obama stuck in sunny Florida as the storm roared up the Eastern Seaboard.

The White House announced the change of plans at 6:45 a.m. The president returned to the White House at 11:07 a.m. and went directly into the Situation Room, canceling his political events. The decision was costly to a campaign so dependent on organization: Mr. Obama used his rallies to collect supporters' telephone numbers and e-mail addresses.

Once the storm struck, it was more of a problem for Mr. Romney. It put him in the position of struggling to explain the skepticism he had expressed during the Republican primaries about a federal role in disaster relief. Even worse, the hurricane pushed him off the stage at a crucial time.

In Boston, Mr. Romney's aides broke out in a chorus of groans as they watched on television as Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey offered effusive praise of the president's handling of the disaster. They viewed it as a self-serving act of disloyalty from a man whom they had expected to deploy that very weekend on Mr. Romney's behalf. The praise of Mr. Obama from a Republican governor came at the same time Mr. Romney had been portraying Mr. Obama as partisan and polarizing.

The same week, the president's campaign released an advertisement in which another Republican, Colin Powell, a former secretary of state, endorsed Mr. Obama. The ad, Mr.

Obama's aides said, produced a spike of support from independent voters. (Mr. Obama's aides grabbed the clip from a television interview with Mr. Powell, deciding not to chance asking him for permission).

Mr. Romney was finding Ohio, a state central to his victory, a stubborn target, as Mr. Obama benefited from the auto industry rescue he championed and that Mr. Romney had opposed. The Romney campaign sought to undermine Mr. Obama with an advertisement misleadingly implying that Jeep was moving jobs from Ohio to China. By every measure, the ad backfired, drawing attacks by leaders of auto companies that employed many of the blue-collar voters that Mr. Romney was trying to reach.

The futility of that effort was apparent outside the sprawling Jeep assembly plant in Toledo, which had just had a \$500 million renovation for production of a new line of vehicles, a project requiring 1,100 new workers.

"Everyone here knows someone who works at Jeep," Jim Wessel, a supply representative making a sales visit. He said no one would believe the ad. Speaking of Mr. Obama's efforts to rescue the auto industry, he said, "I can just tell you I'm glad he did it."

Mr. Romney was running out of states. He made an impulsive run on Pennsylvania, chasing what his aides said were tightening polls there. Mr. Romney had spent little time or money there before roaring in during the campaign's final hours.

On the last weekend of the race, Mr. Romney scheduled a rally in Bucks County. Supporters began arriving at 2 p.m. But his plane was delayed, and as the hours rolled on — and the temperatures dropped — dozens of people were temporarily blocked by the Secret Service as they sought to leave. Mr. Romney arrived to an unpleasant scene: clusters of angry, cold supporters.

That Tuesday, Mr. Romney lost the state by 5 percentage points and watched Mr. Obama hold a 50,000-vote lead in Florida — a state that he had once been confident of winning.

*Michael Barbaro, Michael D. Shear and Peter Baker contributed reporting.*

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# Academic ‘Dream Team’ Helped Obama’s Effort



Chris Keane/Reuters

**DOOR TO DOOR** Ricky Hall, an Obama volunteer, in Charlotte, N.C., last week.

By BENEDICT CAREY

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Late last year Matthew Barzun, an official with the Obama campaign, called Craig Fox, a psychologist in Los Angeles, and invited him to a political planning meeting in Chicago, according to two people who attended the session.

“He said, ‘Bring the whole group; let’s hear what you have to say,’ ” recalled Dr. Fox, a [behavioral economist](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles.

So began an effort by a team of social scientists to help their favored candidate in the 2012 presidential election. Some members of the team had consulted with the Obama campaign in the 2008 cycle, but the meeting in January signaled a different direction.

“The culture of the campaign had changed,” Dr. Fox said. “Before then I felt like we had to sell ourselves; this time there was a real hunger for our ideas.”

This election season the Obama campaign won a [reputation for drawing on the tools of social science](#). The book “[The Victory Lab](#),” by Sasha Issenberg, and news reports have

portrayed an operation that ran its own experiment and, among other efforts, consulted with the Analyst Institute, a Washington voter research group established in 2007 by union officials and their allies to help Democratic candidates.

Less well known is that the Obama campaign also had a panel of unpaid academic advisers. The group — which calls itself the “consortium of behavioral scientists,” or COBS — provided ideas on how to counter false rumors, like one that [President Obama](#) is a Muslim. It suggested how to characterize the Republican opponent, Mitt Romney, in advertisements. It also delivered research-based advice on how to mobilize voters.

“In the way it used research, this was a campaign like no other,” said [Todd Rogers](#), a psychologist at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and a former director of the Analyst Institute. “It’s a big change for a culture that historically has relied on consultants, experts and gurulike intuition.”

When asked about the outside psychologists, the Obama campaign would neither confirm nor deny a relationship with them. “This campaign was built on the energy, enthusiasm and ingenuity of thousands of grass-roots supporters and our staff in the states and in Chicago,” said Adam Fetcher, a campaign spokesman. “Throughout the campaign we saw an outpouring of individuals across the country who lent a wide variety of ideas and input to our efforts to get the president re-elected.”

For their part, consortium members said they did nothing more than pass on research-based ideas, in e-mails and conference calls. They said they could talk only in general terms about the research, because they had signed nondisclosure agreements with the campaign.

In addition to Dr. Fox, the consortium included [Susan T. Fiske](#) of Princeton University; [Samuel L. Popkin](#) of the University of California, San Diego; [Robert Cialdini](#), a professor emeritus at Arizona State University; [Richard H. Thaler](#), a professor of behavioral science and economics at the University of Chicago’s business school; and [Michael Morris](#), a psychologist at Columbia.

“A kind of dream team, in my opinion,” Dr. Fox said.

He said that the ideas the team proposed were “little things that can make a difference” in people’s behavior.

For example, Dr. Fiske’s research has shown that when deciding on a candidate, people generally focus on two elements: competence and warmth. “A candidate wants to make sure to score high on both dimensions,” Dr. Fiske said in an interview. “You can’t just run on the

idea that everyone wants to have a beer with you; some people care a whole lot about competence.”

Mr. Romney was recognized as a competent businessman, polling found. But he was often portrayed in opposition ads as distant, unable to relate to the problems of ordinary people.

When it comes to countering rumors, psychologists have found that the best strategy is not to deny the charge (“I am not a flip-flopper”) but to affirm a competing notion. “The denial works in the short term; but in the long term people remember only the association, like ‘Obama and Muslim,’ ” said Dr. Fox, of the persistent false rumor.

The president’s team affirmed that he is a Christian.

At least some of the consortium’s proposals seemed to have found their way into daily operations. Campaign volunteers who knocked on doors last week in swing states like Pennsylvania, Ohio and Nevada did not merely remind people to vote and arrange for rides to the polls. Rather, they worked from a script, using subtle motivational techniques that research has shown can prompt people to take action.

“We used the scripts more as a guide,” said Sarah Weinstein, 18, a Columbia freshman who traveled with a group to Cleveland the weekend before the election. “The actual language we used was invested in the individual person.”

Simply identifying a person as a voter, as many volunteers did — “Mr. Jones, we know you have voted in the past” — acts as a subtle prompt to future voting, said Dr. Cialdini, a foundational figure in the science of persuasion. “People want to be congruent with what they have committed to in the past, especially if that commitment is public,” he said.

Many volunteers also asked would-be voters if they would sign an informal commitment to vote, a card with the president’s picture on it. This small, voluntary agreement amplifies the likelihood that the person will follow through, research has found.

In a now classic experiment, a pair of Stanford psychologists asked people if they would display in a home window a small card proclaiming the importance of safe driving. Those who agreed to this small favor were later much more likely to agree to a much larger favor, to post a large “Drive Carefully” sign on their lawn — “something no one would agree to do otherwise,” Dr. Cialdini said.

Obama volunteers also asked people if they had a plan to vote and if not, to make one, specifying a time, according to Stephen Shaw, a retired cancer researcher who knocked on

doors in Nevada and Virginia in the days before the election. “One thing we’d say is that we know that when people have a plan, voting goes more smoothly,” he said.

Recent research has shown that making even a simple plan increases the likelihood that a person will follow through, Dr. Rogers, of Harvard, said.

Another technique some volunteers said they used was to inform supporters that others in their neighborhood were planning to vote. Again, recent research shows that this kind of message is much more likely to prompt people to vote than traditional campaign literature that emphasizes the negative — that many neighbors did not vote and thus lost an opportunity to make a difference.

This kind of approach trades on a human instinct to conform to social norms, psychologists say. In another well-known experiment, Dr. Cialdini and two colleagues tested how effective different messages were in getting hotel guests to reuse towels. The message “the majority of guests reuse their towels” prompted a 29 percent increase in reuse, compared with the usual message about helping the environment. The message “the majority of guests in this room reuse their towels” resulted in a 41 percent increase, he said.

Salespeople have known the value of such approaches for a generation, and political campaigns have also used them before this election. Social scientists began offering their services to Democrats back in 2004, when President George W. Bush’s campaign was attacking the Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry, as a flip-flopper and making the label stick.

Dr. Fox and others got an audience with someone in the Kerry campaign, but the meeting didn’t lead to any active consulting, he said. The group circulated a paper outlining its members’ expertise and proposals and in 2006 got a meeting with some senators, including Hillary Rodham Clinton and Harry M. Reid.

Consortium members said they knew of no such informal advisory panel on the Republican side. Efforts to contact the Romney campaign were unsuccessful.

The researchers said they weren’t told which of their ideas were put to use, or how. But sometimes they got hints. Dr. Fiske, the Princeton psychologist, said she received a generic, mass-market e-mail from the Obama campaign before the election.

“It said, ‘People do things when they make plans to do them; what’s your plan?’ ” Dr. Fiske said. “How about that?”

# Secret of the Obama Victory? Rerun Watchers, for One Thing



Daniel Borris for The New York Times

Larry Grisolano helped develop a system that permitted the Obama campaign to target advertising to supporters based on the shows they liked to watch. The campaign placed ads in surprising places, like the TV Land network, that might once have been overlooked.

By JIM RUTENBERG

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It was called “the Optimizer,” and, strategists for [President Obama](#) say it is how he beat a better-financed Republican opposition in the advertising war.

Culling never-before-used data about viewing habits, and combining it with more personal information about the voters the campaign was trying to reach and persuade than was ever before available, the system allowed Mr. Obama’s team to direct advertising with a previously unheard-of level of efficiency, strategists from both sides agree.

“Future campaigns ignore the targeting strategy of the Obama campaign of 2012 at their peril,” said Ken Goldstein, the president of Kantar Media/CMAG, a media monitoring firm that tracked and analyzed political advertising for both campaigns. “This was an unprecedented marrying of detailed information on viewing habits and political predispositions.”

One of the biggest emerging stories about the campaign that has ended is how Mr. Obama's team used information and technology to outmatch and outwit a galvanized and incredibly well-financed opposition.

And in the days since the election new details are emerging about just how outmatched the Republicans were on the technology side, prompting a partywide re-examination of how to avoid a repeat and regain the once-fearsome tactical advantages they held in the era of President George W. Bush. They acknowledge they have their work cut out for themselves.

Romney campaign officials have said the computer-driven operation they built to monitor turnout, and to push supporters to polls in areas that were falling below vote levels needed for victory, crashed and became inoperative for a prolonged period as voting was under way.

The system was meant to combat the far more sophisticated version that Mr. Obama's team had built over years. But Mr. Romney was distracted and financially depleted by his long primary season, and even with perfect execution, both sides agree, he never would have had the time or finances to catch up.

With so much more time to prepare, Mr. Obama's polling and "analytics" department collected so much information about the electorate that it knew far more about which sorts of voters were going to turn out — and where — than the Romney campaign and most public pollsters.

But in between identifying likely supporters and successfully delivering them to the polls there was an intensive effort to send them a constant stream of messages devised to keep wavering 2008 Obama supporters from succumbing to Mr. Romney's effort to win them over, and to get unwavering supporters excited about voting.

That was where "the Optimizer" came in.

In essence, said Larry Grisolano, who helped lead the development of the system, it created a new set of ratings based on the political leanings of categories of people the Obama campaign was interested in reaching, allowing the campaign to buy its advertising on political terms as opposed to traditional television industry terms.

"We were able to create a set of ratings based on a model of our target voters, as opposed to the broader categories that are kind of defined by traditional advertising ratings," he said.

Erik Smith, another senior strategist, said a decision by "super PACS" supporting Mr. Romney to hold off on their first major anti-Obama advertising push until well after the primaries had given the team extra time to develop its system.

Through its vast array of information collected via its e-mail list, Facebook and millions of door-to-door discussions conducted by volunteers in swing states — and fed into the campaign database — the campaign devised a ranking scale for voters ranging from likeliest to support Mr. Obama to least likely.

Then the advertising team worked backward to figure out what sorts of programs likely and undecided voters were liable to watch, and when. It did so using not only traditional Nielsen Media Research data but also newly available information from set-top cable boxes that gave a far more detailed sense of how the groups watched television, and, more important, commercials.

The answers led to advertising purchases that the campaign might not have made, especially as it pursued undecided voters who did not regularly go to traditional sources for news. So it was, said Jim Margolis, a senior advertising strategist, that the campaign bought more late-night advertising time than it otherwise would have on “Late Night With Jimmy Fallon,” “Jimmy Kimmel Live,” ESPN and, most surprisingly, TV Land, the basic cable network devoted to reruns of old programs.

In the case of TV Land, Mr. Margolis said, the campaign was seeking to reach “folks who may not be as political, may not be deciding until later.”

“A lot of these people are lower-information voters,” he said, “not necessarily tuned to politics and watching a little more programming that is out of the main lane of what most of us think of.”

In the past, Mr. Margolis said, the campaign would have been less likely to advertise as much on a network like TV Land because it knew less about its audiences based on the information available to general commercial advertisers.

Advertisers generally buy programming in a standard set of demographic measurements. Those seeking to reach viewers ages 25 to 54 will place commercials in local news; those seeking to reach people over 65 will tend to buy advertising time on 7 p.m. shows like “Jeopardy!”; and those seeking to reach young upscale women ages 18 to 49 will direct their advertising to prime time shows like “Grey’s Anatomy.”

Political campaigns have tended to use the same categories, traditionally advertising most heavily in news and pre-prime-time game shows, where the most reliable voters can generally be found. Mr. Romney’s campaign largely did this until the final weeks of the race, when it increasingly relied on cable as well.

But by then, Mr. Obama's campaign had been on cable for months, focusing on niche networks and programs that did not necessarily deliver large audiences but, as Mr. Grisolano put it, did provide the right ones.

Mr. Obama's team said all year that its technological innovations would count only in a close race, which is exactly what it found itself in.

"All of this stuff only matters in the margins," said Mr. Goldstein, of Kantar Media/CMAG. "But if having an alternative ratings system enabled you to put more messages on target, and you have a bunch of states being decided by one or two percentage points, that can matter."