Also by Jonathan Alter

The Promise:
President Obama, Year One

The Defining Moment:
FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope

Between the Lines:
A View Inside American Politics, People, and Culture

THE
CENTER HOLDS
Obama and His Enemies

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Author's Note

Since graduating from college in 1979, I've covered nine presidential elections, which may qualify me as a masochist. Every four years, at least one candidate piously claims that this election is the most important of our lifetimes. It was never true—until 2012. The last election wasn't the closest contest of recent times but it may have been the most consequential, a hinge of history.

The 2012 campaign featured trivial moments, of course, but it struck me at its core as a titanic ideological struggle over the way Americans see themselves and their obligations to one another. The social contract established during the New Deal era was on the line. Barack Obama's vision was, as he put it, "I am my brother's keeper" and "We're all in this together"; Mitt Romney's faith lay in low taxes and a shrunken government as the handmaiden of business. They agreed on one thing—that the stakes were immense.

With its themes of big money and "the top 1 percent," the election was a throwback to the class-based arguments that had once been a central part of our politics. Romney rejected criticism of Wall Street or calls for higher taxes on the wealthy as "class warfare." Warren Buffett, hardly a left-wing bomb-thrower, summarized what had become the mainstream view: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning." Had Romney prevailed, the win would have become a rout.

I can't pretend to know for sure how Romney would have governed. But it's fair to say that he wouldn't have been president of Massachusetts, with an overwhelmingly liberal legislature that had to be appeased. Romney would have arrived in office on the tide of a resurgent red state America, with a conservative Republican Congress claiming that its sweeping agenda had been validated by the voters. Emboldened movement conservatives would have given Romney little room to maneuver on issues ranging from the budget to Supreme Court
would have had a hard time doing so in office without becoming a
president without a party.

Amid the cut and thrust of the campaign, I tried to keep the true
stakes in mind. Had he won, Romney would likely have had the votes
to repeal Obamacare* as promised on Day One (under the same Sen-
ate rules requiring only fifty-one votes that led to its enactment). Dur-
ing the campaign he pledged to cut federal spending so deeply that it
would, as his running mate Paul Ryan put it, constitute "a fundamentally
differently vision" of government. Ryan, whom the Romney tran-
sition team had already designated to supervise the budget in a new
administration, said that he viewed the social safety net, especially food
stamps, as a "hammock" for the needy that was harming the "national
character." The Romney-Ryan budget would have taken a machete to
total investments in the future, from college loans to medical and sci-
entific research, while eliminating federal funding for other programs
(Planned Parenthood, PBS, Amtrak) entirely.

Even if Democrats blocked some of Romney's bills, his election
would have vindicated the Bush years and everyone associated with
booting Obama, from Karl Rove to the Tea Party. It would have given
comfort (and jobs) to those who considered climate change a hoax
and the war in Iraq a noble cause. With Obamacare and his other achieve-
ments reversed, Obama's presidency might well have been seen by
many historians as a fluke, an aberration occasioned in 2008 by a fi-
nancial crisis and a weak opponent, John McCain.

As I learned when writing a book about Franklin D. Roosevelt and
Herbert Hoover, history is usually written by the winners. If today's
recovery continued or strengthened, it would have allowed a President
Romney to argue that slashing taxes on the wealthy, slashing environ-
mental regulation, slashing programs for the poor, increasing defense
spending, and voucherizing Medicare were what led to economic
growth. History would have recorded that Barack Obama (like Jimmy
Carter) had failed to rescue the economy and Mitt Romney (like Ronald
Reagan) had succeeded.

After an election, voters sometimes take the outcome for granted
or say it was preordained. See! I was right! I always knew Obama was
going to win! Anyone tempted to think this should note that Bill Clin-
ton believed Obama would lose all the way up to the arrival of Hur-
rricane Sandy, or so Romney said Clinton told him when the former
president called him after the election. With a sluggish economy and

a Republican Party backed by billionaires making unlimited campaign
contributions, Obama could easily have been a one-term president.

The Center Holds is more than a campaign book and less than a
complete history of the second two years of Obama's first term. My
aim is to explain how the president's enemies sought to wrench the
country rightward, how Obama built a potent new Chicago political
machine to fight back, and how his, and Romney's, performance in the
2012 campaign played out against a backdrop of hyperpartisanship and
renewed class politics.

All presidents face intense opposition, but Obama's race and
"otherness"—not to mention his longstanding determination to "change
the trajectory of American politics"—put him in a different category.
He embodies a demographic future that frightens people on the other
side. I've charted the progression of the malady known as Obama
Derangement Syndrome and tried to explain the roots of the antinax
and Tea Party uprisings. And I've devoted a chapter to what I call "the
Voter Suppression Project," a concerted GOP effort in nineteen states
to change the rules of the game to discourage Democrats from voting.
Toward the end I explain how the backlash against voter suppression
contributed to Obama's victory.

I'm also fascinated by what I see as a strange role reversal at the
heart of the campaign. Romney, the self-described "numbers guy," re-
jected Big Data and ran a Mad Men campaign based on a vague and
unscientific "hope and change" theme. Obama ran a state-of-the-art
"Bain campaign," using some of the same analytics pioneered in the
corporate world to redefine voter contact and build the most sophisti-
cated political organization in American history.

The 2012 cycle will likely be seen as the first "data campaign." Just
as Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy have been viewed by his-
torians as the first presidents to master radio and television, respectively,
Barack Obama will likely be seen as the president who pioneered the
use of digital technology that, in various forms, will now be a perma-
nent part of politics around the world.

Like my 2010 book, The Promise: President Obama, Year One, this
account draws on my Chicago roots. I met Obama there when he was
an Illinois state senator who had recently lost a bid for Congress. In
the years since, I haven't lost my fascination with the paradox of a man
succeeding so spectacularly at a profession that he often dislikes. He is
missing the schmooze gene that is standard equipment for people in
politics. In the Washington chapters, I try to assess the consequences
of this for his presidency.

* After the president embraced the term in 2012, "Obamacare" ceased to be a pejorative. I've used it here only because I did so in earlier drafts.
presidency that he likes best. The Center Holds has some of that (e.g., new details about the killing of Osama bin Laden and the Supreme Court battle over Obamacare), but it is mostly about politics. Obama knew as early as mid-2010 that almost nothing substantive would get done for the next two years as the country chose its path.

I’m focused here on detailing the backstory of the big events of 2011 and 2012. This is a work of reporting, chronicling everything from Roger Alles’s paranoid behavior to the gmid in the secret Chicago "Cave" who built crucial models for the Obama campaign to the car accident in the Everglades that helped motivate a South Florida bartender named Scott Prouty to videotape Romney talking about the “47 percent.” While I’m not sure I agree with David Axelrod that campaigns are “MRIs of the soul,” I hope to provide a few X-rays.

“Contemporary history” is a genre fraught with peril. Some events will shrink in significance over time, while others I underplay or miss entirely may end up looming large. Passions have not yet cooled, and the story of Obama contending with his enemies remains unfinished. It would be dishonest for me to pretend to be neutral in this contest. But all good history has a point of view. The important thing is that it be written under the sovereignty of facts, wherever they may lead.

In 2011, when it looked as if Obama might lose the presidency, a friend asked me to explain how such a thing could happen. Where did Grover Norquist come from? I told her I wasn’t sure Obama would lose—that it could go either way—but I would try to tell a story of this moment in our national life that didn’t neglect the historical context. So I write in the past tense and stud the narrative with bits of relevant history that are integrated into the text rather than relegated to footnotes. Franklin Roosevelt ordered the killing of a single enemy combatant; John F. Kennedy confronted right-wing haters; and Richard Nixon ran a TV ad mentioning “the 47 percent.” As Mark Twain (supposedly) said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”

The arguments of 2012 go back to the dawn of the republic, when Thomas Jefferson stressed limited government and Alexander Hamilton championed a strong nation investing in its people and future. Obama’s themes are those of the great twentieth-century progressive presidents, from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson. Romney and the conservatives in Congress are ideological descendants of those who opposed the New Deal and the Great Society and saw the business of America as business. I’ve used my reporter’s notebook to update these historical clivages.

If the 2012 campaign had merely contained the natural tension in
Demography as Destiny

The numbers told the story of a changing America. In his losing 2008 campaign, John McCain won the same proportion of the white vote as Ronald Reagan did in his 1980 landslide. In 1992 the electorate was 88 percent white. Twenty years later, it was expected by Chicago (although not by Boston) to be 71 percent white.

But that was still nearly three-quarters of the country. Obama's problem was that polls showed his support among white working-class men plummeting, from 39 percent in 2008 into the 20s. If that didn't change, the president would have to improve his 2008 performance among youth, minorities, and women to win. This was the job of Operation Vote, Obama's outreach and base mobilization program, which was run by Katherine Archuleta and Buffy Wicks in Chicago. They couldn't use what Archuleta called a "cookie cutter" approach to constituency groups because the variations were endless. Young people had particular tastes in popular culture that had to be part of volunteer recruitment. Blacks were five times more likely to be on Twitter than any other group. Latinos were heavy users of smartphones because it allowed their children to go online without expensive computers. Women responded especially well to messages defending Planned Parenthood.

Obama's biggest demographic advantage was that old Republicans were dying and young Democrats were turning eighteen and eligible to vote. Chicago planned to make as many as five million kids who had been between fourteen and seventeen in 2008 now welcome the chance to do what their older siblings had done, even if it wasn't as cool this time. Beyond the hip new videos to stream and gear to buy at the Obama store, Chicago used social media to spread the idea of just doing something for Obama, if not skipping class to spend the day knocking on doors then at least sharing an enticing recruitment video with a great sound track on Facebook or Tumblr. Obama's record helped, as word filtered out that he was responsible for around...
college loans and being able to stay on your parents' health insurance until age twenty-six. And it didn't hurt that young people thought Romney was culturally clueless and in the grip of right-wingers. But none of that would be enough to get them to register and vote (preferably early) in the numbers Obama needed. That required relentless organization down to the "dorm captains" assigned to almost every dormitory at every college in every battleground state.

Beyond youth, OPA would have to register African Americans, Latinos, and women detached from the system and lure back to the polls those who voted for Obama in 2008 but stayed home in 2010. The only thing these potential Obama voters had in common was that on balance they suffered more in the recession than Republicans did. Now they would be asked to vote their class interests and their future but not their present-day pocketbooks. The unemployed tended to support Obama; the ones who had seen their portfolios zoom back up in the past four years more often went for Romney. The irony didn't escape Obama World.

In 2008, Obama received 96 percent of the black vote. By early 2012 he was polling in the high 80s, with black registration down 7 percent in four years. It seemed that nothing could revive the fervor of 2008. Many black clergymen despised the idea of same-sex marriage and felt reluctant to urge their congregants to work hard for a president who had endorsed it. Stubbornly high black unemployment made it difficult to argue that a black man in the Oval Office had fundamentally changed the lives of black people. Even so, almost all African American commentators still backed Obama, and he had no patience for those who didn't.

Among the dissidents was Professor Cornel West, who had campaigned for Obama in 2008 but grew upset when Obama stopped returning his phone calls. After the election, West learned that Obama's top economic adviser would be Larry Summers, who as president of Harvard had pushed West out of the university in 2002 in a dispute over whether a professor should record hip-hop songs. West gave speeches around the country saying that Obama wasn't a true progressive and that he couldn't "in good conscience" tell people to vote for him, though he admitted that his failure to secure special inauguration tickets for his mother and brother contributed to his hard feelings.

In July 2010 the president spotted West in the front row of the audience for his speech to the National Urban League. Afterward he came down to West's seat and grew angry. "I'm not progressive? What kind of shit is this?" the president hissed, his face contorted. West said later that a brassy African American woman standing behind him told the president to his face, "How dare you speak to Dr. West like that?" and argued after Obama left that the obscenity would have justified removal by the Secret Service had it come from anyone else. In the months following the confrontation West stepped up his attacks, calling Obama a "black messiah of Wall Street oligarchs" and a black puppet of corporate plutocrats." He added, "I think my dear brother Barack Obama has a certain fear of free black men. It's understandable. As a young brother who grows up in a white context, brilliant African father, he's always had to fear being a white man with black skin.

As he was reciting from West, the president drew closer to Reverend Al Sharpton, who had simultaneously shed one hundred pounds and his incendiary approach to public life. (Even former New York mayor Ed Koch had become a friend of Sharpton's.) He had never apologized for his conduct in the Tawawa Brawley case, but seemed to be trying to make amends.* In 2008 Obama appreciated that Sharpton defended him from blacks who criticized him for distancing himself from his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Sharpton understood that pushing his way into pictures beside Obama wouldn't be helpful with white voters. He didn't care that Obama was using him for street cred with disappointed blacks.

When Obama learned in 2009 that Sharpton had become a strong supporter of education reform, he invited him and Newt Gingrich to the White House for a private bipartisan discussion on the subject. While Gingrich later swung right to run for president, Obama and Sharpton set to work building a new pro-reform coalition in the Democratic Party. They and Arne Duncan, the secretary of education, were fed up with teachers union militants telling parents that more accountability was somehow harmful. The reformers pulled together around the simple but powerful idea of viewing every education initiative through the lens of what was good for children, not adult constituency groups.

Over the time the president made Sharpton feel included, and Sharpton

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* Tawawa Brawley was a fifteen-year-old African American girl from Wappingers Falls, New York, who claimed in 1997 that she had been actually assaulted by a group of white men and smeared with feces. Sharpton was among those who recklessly suggested that a white assistant district attorney, Steven Pagano, was one of the attackers. It turned out that Brawley made the story up.
returned the favor by becoming one of Obama's biggest defenders. His refusal to criticize the president in any way before the 2012 election signaled to many African Americans that they should follow suit.

But tensions within the black community continued. Sharpton and West got into a shouting match on Ed Schultz's show on MSNBC, when West accused Sharpton of being a stooge for the White House. When defending himself in private, Sharpton liked to point out how black civil rights leaders of the past such as Frederick Douglass, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King Jr. had handled their relationships with progressive American presidents. Each was respectful. Sharpton noted that King's famous 1963 March on Washington was not directed against Kennedy personally; in fact he met with JFK both before and after the march, as he did on several occasions with Lyndon Johnson. Sharpton's point was that black leaders of the past didn't insult the president, Cornel West-style. "And those presidents weren't black!" he shouted.

After the blowup with West, the president welcomed Sharpton and a half-dozen other black hosts and commentators to the Roosevelt Room of the White House. The subject turned to Tavis Smiley, a PBS host (and cohost of a radio show with West) who was also severely critical of Obama. Tom Joyner, a strong Obama supporter and host of the top-rated black talk radio show, thought that West and Smiley (neither of whom was invited) were causing other blacks to denigrate the president. He began to mix it up with the author Michael Eric Dyson, who wanted the administration to target its efforts more on particular black needs. Obama jumped in to say he had no problem with Dyson or anyone else disagreeing with him about how to help the needy. What upset him was critics who "question my blackness and my commitment to blacks." He felt the community needed to be a little more sophisticated politically. "If I go out there saying 'black, black,' do you think that will help black people?" he asked, adding that Congress would never support legislation explicitly intended for African Americans. His legislative program was aimed at helping all Americans but would disproportionately help blacks: "Pell grants. Black people. Health care! Black people."

The president's record showed that he had delivered for African Americans far beyond college loans and Obamacare. The stimulus saved hundreds of thousands of jobs of state and local workers, a large percentage of them black, and provided $850 million for historically black colleges as part of its aid to higher education. The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 ended the discrepancy in punishment for crimes that involve the same amounts of crack and powdered cocaine. The extension of the Earned Income Tax Credit kept millions of the working poor, disproportionately black, from slipping back into poverty, and the extension of unemployment insurance and food stamps helped millions of African Americans. But with black unemployment at 14 percent and four out of ten young black males still caught up in the criminal justice system, Obama had hardly transformed the community he had sought to join when he was a young man.

By mid-2012 Obama's hold on the black vote was almost complete. His credibility was such that support for gay marriage within the black community went up almost 20 points overnight after the president endorsed it, no matter what the attitude of black clergy. And that was before the political system felt the full force of a backlash against voter suppression that would spur memories of the civil rights movement.

In the late 1980s, after Reagan signed the bipartisan Simpson-Mazzoli Act reforming immigration policy, the Latino vote seemed up for grabs. Democrats considered Latino voters part of their base, but Republicans thought they could make headway with a rapidly growing Catholic constituency that responded well to pro-family, pro-entrepreneurship messages. Then, in 1994, Republican Governor Pete Wilson of California passed Proposition 187, a punitive law later overturned by the courts that deprived illegal aliens of all public services. Prop 187, still seared in the minds of Latinos nearly two decades later, turned California into a solid blue state and forced the GOP to play catch-up with Latinos nationwide.

George W. Bush, who had been a pro-immigration governor of Texas, emphasized bringing Latinos back into the GOP fold. He received more than 40 percent of the Latino vote in both 2000 and 2004. But in 2006 nativism, a fever that goes back to the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s, surged within the GOP base, which split with Bush and

* Bush was also enlightened on race. Both of his secretaries of state were African American, and he focused intently on treatment of AIDS in Africa. In late 2009, when a former aide, lan Ollstein, an African American conservative, told Bush that his next book, Acting White, recouped how some blacks thought Obama acted white, Bush got red in the face and began yelling, "Take it out! Take it all of that stuff out! It looks terrible for a black number of my stuff... too black, black. I don't want a black president."
turned illegal immigration into a top-tier campaign issue. Bush dropped comprehensive immigration reform, and his administration tripled the fees charged to process citizenship applications, a seemingly small change that alienated Latinos and other immigrants. By 2008 the presence of Representative Tom Tancredo, a vitriolic anti-immigrant activist, in the GOP primaries pushed the other candidates to the right, which sent even more Latinos into the Democratic Party. Soon the nominee, John McCain, distanced himself from his own immigration bill. (He would renounce it entirely in order to get reelected to the Senate in 2010.) Obama hadn’t been particularly popular with Latinos in 2006—he lost them to Hillary Clinton by a wide margin in every primary—but in the general election he won the Latino vote by 34 points.

That bought Latinos nothing. About 1.5 million illegal aliens were deported under Obama, far more than under Bush. And the president reneged on his promise to make comprehensive immigration reform a priority. Even a lesser goal, enactment of the DREAM Act, failed at the end of 2010 thanks to Republican obstruction. Many Latinos charged that the president didn’t put the same muscle behind the DREAM Act that he applied to repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.

In an April 2011 meeting in the Roosevelt Room with Latino journalists and activists, Obama said Republicans should "pay a price" for their obstructionist positions on immigration. María Teresa Kumar of Voto Latino replied that both parties should pay a price. When José Díaz-Balart, a Telemundo anchorman from a Republican political family, told the president that “people say” he wasn’t sympathetic to Latinos, Obama shot back, “No, you say.” He vehemently rejected that charge and said the failure of the DREAM Act was the biggest disappointment of his presidency so far.

The story of Obama’s contacts with Representative Luis Gutiérrez of Chicago resembled what happened with Cornel West, except with a happier ending. Gutiérrez had been, according to one White House official, "weirdly obsessed with the president." He called often in 2009, claiming an old Chicago friendship, and eventually Obama stopped taking his calls. In May 2010 the congressman got himself arrested during a demonstration in front of the White House protesting the deportations. At Christmas, just after the DREAM Act failed, Obama invited Gutiérrez, Representative Nydia Velázquez, and Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey to the White House and told them that he expected no legislation on immigration for another two years. “Let’s put our thinking caps on,” he suggested, and figure out a solution from the executive branch. The president hugged Gutiérrez and the two Chicagoans...

But in 2011 their relationship deteriorated again. Chief of Staff Bill Daley invited Latino leaders in for a meeting and Gutiérrez asked what the “thinking caps” had produced. When Daley said, in effect, nothing, Gutiérrez went ballistic. He even accused the president of sending him a letter that sounded sarcastic, which Cecilia Muñoz of the White House said was ridiculous. “They’ve been silent for two years and now they’re bragging about deporting a million people, many of them kids? I can’t shut up about this,” Gutiérrez said. He predicted that Obama would still get two-thirds of the Latino vote, but turnout would be so depressed that he might lose the election. The White House was furious with Gutiérrez. After the congressman had promised to keep his complaints private, he went on a national speaking tour blasting the president.

The problem Gutiérrez complained about continued to eat away at the president’s Latino support. Muñoz, the White House official responsible for Latino issues, admitted to colleagues that the administration did a “crappy job” of explaining the Secure Communities program, whose aim was stepped-up deportations of hardened criminals, which is what led to the record number of deportations. But she kept telling Latino critics that the climate in 2010 was brutal. Representative Gabby Giffords of Arizona would call up Rahm Emanuel when he was chief of staff and implore him on the phone, “You gotta send me more National Guard to secure the border.” Giffords was worried about losing her reelection fight.

In June 2011 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agreed to start using prosecutorial discretion in deciding deportations, but the new policy didn’t work on the ground, where ICE agents complained that they couldn’t easily make judgments about which immigrants deserved prosecution and which didn’t. In the year that followed, the government halted the deportation of only 593 students.

All year the problem festered, and even Latinos sympathetic to Obama grew frustrated. Bill Richardson, the former governor of New Mexico, had become persona non grata in the Clinton wing of the Democratic Party by jumping to Obama in 2008 after explicitly promising Clinton at a Super Bowl party that he wouldn’t. He was slated to be secretary of commerce in 2009 (until derailed by a New Mexico scandal) and was as friendly with the president as any politician could expect to be. But in August 2011 Richardson, normally an envoy-sounding sort, broke the festive mood of Obama’s fiftieth birthday barbecue in...
the Rose Garden. With Jay-Z and Tom Hanks nearby, he bent the president’s ear about how the deportations were hurting innocent immigrants, including a disturbingly large number of children. Obama told him he was working on it, but Richardson didn’t see any evidence of movement for many months.

Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, claimed to want a more nuanced deportation policy, but her hard-line subordinates, who came mostly from law enforcement backgrounds, dragged their feet on changing the policy. Their people were trained to arrest, not act as admission officers trying to figure out whether a kid did well in school. And the department’s general counsel threw up legal objections to easing deportations without a change in the law. But as usual in the government, there was wiggle room in “enforcement standards” and “prosecutorial discretion.” Kathy Ruemmler, the White House counsel, recognized that while ad hoc discretion was unworkable, the government could set new rules that made arresting young, law-abiding high school graduates the lowest priority of the department and allowed young people in that category to apply for such status.

On the Hill, Democratic Senator Dick Durbin wouldn’t let the issue go. In early 2012 his office received calls nearly every week from young people being deported. Muñoz, a former immigration reformer who was now director of the Domestic Policy Council in the White House, began pushing in meetings for a new policy. Muñoz liked to say internally that “Democrats can no longer rely on Republicans being bigger assholes” on the issue. Now they had to do something.

On June 17, 2012, the president decreed that 800,000 young people who had arrived when they were younger than sixteen, finished high school, and met other requirements could be given temporary status and avoid deportation. “We’re happy he’s our leader and champion,” Gutiérrez exulted. “This is the president we elected.” Almost immediately, thousands of young people stepped out of the shadows and formed long lines to apply for new status.

Not everyone was so sure the decision would yield huge political benefits for Obama. It was hard to say whether more Latinos would vote just because others in their community avoided deportation. Many had been directly hurt by the foreclosure crisis, which hit Latinos harder than any other group. Some experts in Latino voting patterns said it would still take the reemergence of someone like Lou Dobbs or Glenn Beck spewing venom to motivate enough voters to match the Latino turnout numbers of 2008.

Demography as Destiny

Obama’s “Latino track” was almost like running a presidential campaign in a different country, or a country that the United States was about to become. It included messages, voter contact strategies, and celebrities that were off the radar of the Washington press corps.

Everyone knew the Latino giant was stirring, but only the Democrats were doing anything about it. About 40 percent of eligible Latinos weren’t even registered. And of those who were, fewer than half usually voted, compared to about 65 percent participation among all registered voters. To change that, Operation Vote launched an aggressive marketing campaign at soccer matches, boxing tournaments, and Latino beauty parlors and barbershops. (Similar efforts in the black barbershops had been critical in the 2008 primaries.) OFA field organizers attended citizenship ceremonies in battleground states and discreetly asked new citizens if they wanted to register. Messina worried for months that word of the effort would leak and make it seem as if the Obama campaign was politicizing a solemn event.

The campaign hired Bendixen & Amandi, a Miami-based communications consulting firm that specialized in Latino voters. In the past, ads aimed at Latinos ran only at the end of a campaign. Obama’s started in March. And instead of merely translating issue ads into Spanish, the usual practice, Chicago created separate and carefully tailored mes-

* In 1978 Latinos made up 4.7 percent of the U.S. population. In 2010 the figure was 16.3 percent. In 2000 their estimated to be about 45 percent of all Americans.
sages. Roughly a third of all TV viewers now routinely time-shifted the shows they watched, which meant that they saw fewer ads. Only a tenth of Latino viewers did so. That made advertising on *tele-novelas* and other Spanish-language entertainment programs especially efficient.

The firm's early focus groups were discouraging for Obama. Latinos liked the president personally but didn't think he was effective. Over and over, focus group respondents said, "He hasn't really done anything." They were largely unfamiliar with achievements like the auto rescue and the health care bill, but they knew the president had failed on immigration reform. "He promised a bill and then he deported my next-door neighbor's kid," one said.

The best way out of that hole was to educate Latino voters about Obamacare, which was immensely popular when Latinos learned the details. The pitch was much more direct than in Obama's English-language media. Certain families, the Spanish-language ads said, "will receive economic help from the government to pay for quality health insurance." If the election was partly about the role of government in American life, Chicago was betting that Latinos favored a big role. Romney went the other way, targeting his ads at Latino small business owners. They were an important subgroup but made up less than 10 percent of Latino voters.

For the Latino market, the messenger is often more important than the message. The surrogate Chicago chose was Cristina Saralegui, known as "the Latina Oprah." Saralegui had just finished a twenty-year run hosting one of the top-rated shows on Univision, the Spanish-language commercial network that beats all cable networks in the ratings and in some time slots beats NBC, ABC, and CBS too. A Cuban American, she had enormous crossover appeal with Mexican Americans (who made up more than half of Latinos in the United States) and other Latinos. Fernand Amandi, also Cuban American, begged Saralegui to appear in Obama TV spots, and though she had never done anything political before, she finally agreed. By coincidence, her signature sign-off line on her show, "Pa'lante!," translates roughly as "Forward!" Saralegui conducted an "interview" with Michelle Obama in which she pointed to the first lady's midsection and asked, "Is the factory closed?" Michelle said she and the president were done having kids. That exchange didn't air, but Saralegui's ads on Univision and Telemundo were known by almost all Latino voters, and by almost no one in the separate universe of white America.

Sheldon Adelson had a lot of experience hiring Latinos for his Las Vegas businesses and he urged the Romney campaign to do more to win their votes. Romney's son Craig appeared in an ad speaking Spanish, but it contained only platitudes about his family and didn't penetrate. Neither did a negative spot Republicans ran in Florida entitled "Chávez por Obama," pegged to Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez's comment that he preferred the president over Romney. Negative ads rarely had much traction with Latinos, though an Obama spot attacking Romney for opposing Sonia Sotomayor's nomination for the Supreme Court seemed to resonate in the Puerto Rican community, where turnout would help determine the outcome in Florida. The big difference was volume: Romney ads were far less visible on Spanish-language television; Obama ran 13,232 spots compared to 3,435 for Romney.

In August, Obama's numbers with Latinos sagged a bit, and Bendixen & Amandi pushed hard for a big ad buy connected to the DREAM Act. After some resistance, Chicago agreed. The president appeared in a direct-to-camera spot in which he spoke in Spanish of the "buen ejemplo" (good example) offered by the young "dreamers" who were brought to this country illegally as children and stayed to make something of their lives. Native speakers were impressed by Obama's accent, especially in contrast to Romney, who spoke only in English.

Between June and Election Day, many dreamers and their extended families and friends became passionate Obama supporters for a simple reason: fear of what would happen if Romney was elected and reversed the policy. Because these young people had stepped out of the shadows, the government would have their names and be able to quickly deport them.

**To win, Obama** needed the gender gap to stay wide, but he couldn't lose too many Catholic votes. These conflicting goals played out on the issue of contraception.

When George Stephanopoulos of ABC News pressed Romney about his views on contraception during a January primary debate, Boston was livid. The liberal media, it seemed, was trying to make Romney out to be against birth control. But the bigger flap was a confrontation between the White House and Catholic bishops over state-funded contraception. When the administration moved to limit religious exemptions to the Obamacare requirement that employers provide birth control as part of their standard package of health care benefits, Romney pounced.

The issue crystallized tensions within the Democratic Party over implementation of Obamacare. In late January, after a spirited internal White House debate, the president decided to move forward with the new policy.
Bill Daley against women (Valerie Jarrett and Nancy-Ann DeParle), the president decided on a narrow rule that exempted only churches, mosques, and temples. DeParle, the deputy chief of staff assigned to the issue, later insisted that the policymaking was incomplete and nothing had been set in stone.

But conservative clergy were on fire over the exemption, and two days later they began denouncing the regulation from the pulpit as an assault on religious liberty. A letter from the U.S. Conference of Bishops saying the same thing spread quickly. Regional media and then cable news ignited the story. In Chicago, campaign officials shook their heads at the White House’s failure to lay the political groundwork better on an issue of such sensitivity. “It was like getting caught with your pants down,” one said.

After the liberal columnists E. J. Dionne and Mark Shields, both Catholics, weighed in on the side of the bishops, the president looked stung. In February, he offered a compromise: make the insurance companies, not the government, pay for any contraceptives—and won over Sister Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association and an Obama ally. Liberals rallied. Obama was like a quarterback on a broken play who scrambled across the line of scrimmage for a first down.

Of course, the conservative base was hardly appeased. Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri introduced an amendment that would allow any employer (not just religiously affiliated institutions) to refuse on religious grounds to include contraception in their health care coverage. This was a pivotal mistake. It allowed women’s groups to argue that your boss shouldn’t be in your bedroom. The amendment was defeated, and Romney and Senator Scott Brown of Massachusetts, a co-sponsor of the Blunt Amendment, found themselves on the defensive with women.

Rush Limbaugh helped the Democrats keep the issue out front. In late February, Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University Law student, testified before a congressional committee in support of mandatory employer health coverage of contraception. It was an unremarkable appearance that drew little public attention until Limbaugh seized on it and accused Fluke of being a “prostitute” and a “slut.” He went on: “If we are going to have to pay for this [the contraception] then we want something in return, Ms. Fluke. And that would be the videos of all this sex posted online so we can see what we’re getting for our money.”

When asked about Limbaugh’s comments on a rope line, Romney said, “I’ll just say this, which is it’s not the language I would have used.” Romney was under no obligation to denounce Limbaugh, but it represented a missed opportunity and another sign that he would do little to reach out to anyone outside the base.

A series of other news stories kept women’s health in the news: The Susan B. Komen Foundation for breast cancer research stopped its funding of Planned Parenthood, then reversed itself; Governor Bob McDonnell of Virginia signed a bill requiring some women to undergo a transvaginal ultrasound before receiving an abortion, then reversed himself; and Todd Akin, the GOP candidate for Senate in Missouri, wrecked his campaign by telling an interviewer that there was such a thing as “legitimate rape.” The combination of these stories widened the gender gap, which helped the president.

As the campaign heated up, Democrats tried to press the advantage with a series of distortions, starting with the alliterative but unfactual notion that the Republican Party was engaged in a “war on women.” Chicago did nothing to tamp down the idea, spread widely in radio ads funded by liberal groups, that Romney was against the distribution of birth control and opposed abortion in all cases. In truth, he was against federal funding of birth control and requiring institutions to offer it, and he adhered to a common view of abortion, embraced by all recent Republican presidents, that included exceptions for rape and incest. But he never used his influence to change the Republican Party platform, which continued to have no such exceptions.

Unfortunately for the Romney campaign, that would not be the last the American public would hear about rape before the election.