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THE GAMBLE

Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election

With a new preface by the authors

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Princeton and Oxford
To Serena, Ethan, and Hannah, with gratitude and love.—JMS

This one's for you, Larry—for professional inspiration and personal grounding. And for you, Jeff, for the opposite.—LVL
The scientific study of presidential elections arguably dates back to a 1948 book called *The People’s Choice*. Its authors, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, set out to understand the 1940 presidential race between President Franklin Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie in an unprecedented fashion. Setting up shop in Erie County, Ohio, they interviewed a sample of residents every month from May through November of the election year, thereby tracking the opinions of the same people interviewed at multiple points in time.

What they found was surprising to many. At a time when the rise of fascism and the development of mass media—especially radio—had raised fears about people’s susceptibility to propaganda, Lazarsfeld and colleagues found that people’s views of the candidates were mostly stable. Very few people switched their support from Roosevelt to Willkie, or vice versa. Campaign propaganda did not seem as powerful as many believed it would be.

But the campaign still mattered, just in more subtle ways. For one, it helped to reinforce the opinions people already had. If you were a Roosevelt supporter, the campaign solidified this choice. The campaign also pushed undecided voters to the candidate that they were already predisposed to support. Undecided voters whose demographic profile made them look like Democrats mostly ended up supporting Roosevelt, and those who looked like Republicans mostly ended up supporting Willkie. Lazarsfeld and colleagues showed that a campaign could be consequential, even in an electorate in which many voters were not up for grabs.

In the years after this book, other scholars began to use social science methods and data to study elections. Lazarsfeld would help author a second book, this one about the 1948 election. Not long afterward, a team of social scientists at the University of Michigan wrote other seminal books about...
voting behavior and elections—particularly *The American Voter*—as well as articles about individual presidential elections that were published not long after the elections themselves. More recently, there have been notable book-length studies of the tumultuous 2000 presidential election and the historic 2008 election, when the first African-American, Barack Obama, was elected president.

*The Gamble* fits squarely in this tradition. It is the story of how Republicans nominated Mitt Romney to challenge Barack Obama in 2012, and how Obama ultimately won reelection. We tell this story using similar kinds of tools as these earlier books, including quantitative data and statistical methods. Indeed, one of our central sources of data is a survey not unlike the one in Erie County, Ohio: multiple interviews with the same set of voters over the year before the election. The main difference is whereas that 1940 survey focused on 600 voters in one county, ours includes 45,000 voters across the United States. These tools help us to identify why voters decided as they did and how the campaign affected them along the way. This, in turn, helps explain why Obama won and what implications his reelection has for party competition in future elections.

There is a parallel tradition of campaign narratives written by journalists. In fact, perhaps the canonical book in this tradition—Theodore White’s *The Making of the President*—was published not long after the first social scientific accounts appeared, when White documented the 1960 election between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. White would write other installments after the 1964, 1968, and 1972 presidential elections.

Journalists working in this tradition rely on different sources of information than do social scientists. Rather than crunch data, they spend many months on the campaign trail, following the candidates. They conduct interviews with the candidates, their campaign strategists, and sometimes a small number of voters. These books seek to answer a similar question about the election—why did the winner win?—but mainly by focusing on the decisions the candidates made. These books thus paint vivid pictures of the characters in the campaign—their personalities, their strengths and weaknesses, their foibles and eccentricities. These books dwell on dramatic moments. They tell lots of good stories. After the 2012 election, several such books were written, including Dan Balz’s *Collision 2012* and Mark Halperin and John Heilemann’s *Double Down: Game Change 2012*.

*The Gamble* differs in key respects from these books. We lack the access to the candidates that journalists can negotiate; and thus we cannot ask the candidates why they did what they did. What we can do, however, is figure out whether their actions made an impact on voters. That is where those 45,000 voters, a few graphs, and the statistics waiting in the appendix become useful.

To take one example, consider a storyline being pushed by Romney after his loss. He blamed his loss on the fact that Obama had given “gifts” to key constituencies. For instance, Obama’s signature achievement in his first term, health care reform, mandated insurance coverage of contraceptives. Romney argued that “free contraceptives” helped Obama woo female voters. In *Double Down*, Halperin and Heilemann report Romney’s claim, but lacking any means of testing it and any countervailing data from the Obama campaign, they let the claim stand. By contrast, we use our survey data to examine how much the debate over reproductive rights affected voters. Contrary to Romney’s claim, we found that the issue of reproductive rights did more to keep male voters from leaving Obama than it did to attract women to him. Most women for whom this issue was important had already chosen their candidate before the debate about contraception and the controversies that followed throughout 2012.

To be sure, both kinds of books about an election are valuable. It is important to understand what was going on inside campaign war rooms and what was going on inside the voting booth. Each tradition—social science and journalism—can complement the other. When they diverge, however, we think that science should be privileged, to the extent that it rigorously tests competing claims using carefully collected data. Interestingly, this belief has become prevalent not only among scientists, but also among some journalists and a fair bit of the population. Hard data and scientific approaches increasingly animate the conversation within journalism, perhaps most visibly in outlets like Nate Silver’s 538 website (which lived at the New York Times during 2012) and the wonkish blogging of Ezra Klein (in 2012 at the Washington Post). Campaigns are increasingly scientific themselves—gathering data, running experiments, and constructing statistical models to predict voter turnout and preferences for the candidates. Modern campaign strategy increasingly resembles what Sasha Isenberg provocatively called “The Victory Lab” in his book of the same title. There is every reason to think, then, that the understanding of campaigns and their effects will draw more and more on approaches similar to ours.

Part of *The Gamble*’s contribution draws directly on its social science lineage. In essence, previous studies told us where to look to identify important patterns and the likely impact of the campaign. For example, 70 years after the Erie County study, we find that many of the same patterns still exist. Preferences for Obama or Romney tended to be stable for the vast majority of Americans, and relatively few switched their support from one to the other. At the same time, the campaign helped to reinforce the views of those who appeared to make up their mind early on. And for those who remained undecided, the campaign led them to a predictable choice.
undecided Democrats mostly gravitated to Obama and undecided Republicans to Romney.

We also push in directions less well-explored in the previous literature. One direction concerns presidential primaries, which remain vastly understudied relative to presidential general elections. Indeed, the last major study of campaign dynamics in presidential primaries—Larry Bartels’s Presidential Primaries—was published in 1988. The 2012 presidential primary was a propitious one to study, as it featured a highly fluid Republican race with multiple frontrunners. We are able to show that the ups and downs in the polls followed a predictable pattern, driven largely by news coverage. We also show that Mitt Romney—who never experienced any real ups or downs and was often underestimated by commentators—remained the frontrunner by several key measures. Part of our contribution stems from new technologies that automatically gather and analyze news coverage from thousands of media outlets. This allows us to ascertain how much and what kind of attention the media paid to each candidate, and to do so in nearly real time as the campaign unfolded.

Another less-explored direction concerns the general election campaign. Only recently have scholars been able to measure the volume of advertising and field activity with anything approaching precision. In 2012, we marry data on both ads and field mobilization to our survey data and to data on the election results. This allows us to evaluate the impact of various forms of campaigning simultaneously and in comparison to other factors that affect election outcomes, such as the state of the economy.

Three key findings emerge. First, we show that when either Obama or Romney was able to out-advertise the other, the polls could move—but the effects of the ads typically wore off quickly. This contrasts with a piece of conventional wisdom from 2012: that the Obama campaign’s decision to air an early advertising blitz in the summer helped defeat Romney. In all likelihood, the effects of the summer ads on vote choice had long worn off by November.

Second, the Obama campaign’s field organization appears to have earned Obama votes, and more than Romney’s field organization earned him. But the number of votes won was not likely large enough to determine the outcome in crucial battleground states. This again contrasts with the conventional wisdom, which attributed his victory, implicitly or explicitly, to the strategic mastery of the Obama campaign on the ground.

Finally, the kinds of campaign effects that we identify—which certainly appear real—are small compared to the fundamental factors that affect elections. Romney would have needed vast quantities of additional campaign resources—over and above the $1.2 billion he and his allies already had—to offset the advantages Obama had as an incumbent president presiding over a slowly growing economy.

Our account, however, remains necessarily limited. The scientific understanding of an election takes time, and we will be learning more about 2012 for years. For one, 2012 certainly showed that money raised by outside groups is becoming a larger part of the money spent in an election campaign. The question is what impact it has, and whether its impact differs much from money raised by the candidates themselves. For example, during the Republican presidential primary, a few wealthy supporters of Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum contributed millions of dollars to outside groups supporting them. Did this encourage Gingrich and Santorum to stay in the race longer, even though winning the nomination was always a long shot? Groups supporting Romney also raised a great deal of money during the primary and general election campaigns. How much did this help him? Would it have been preferable to raise more of his own money and rely less on these groups, given that Romney’s campaign team could have directly controlled how that money was spent?

The impact of new campaign tools also remains a contested subject. The tools of “The Victory Lab” have led to many innovations, especially in Democratic campaigns. In 2012, the Obama campaign used experiments with its fundraising emails to determine, for example, what kinds of subject lines would generate the most donations. Other innovations of the Obama campaign—such as having its supporters contact targeted voters via Facebook—also received a great deal of press. However, we know little about the impact of many of these innovations. There is no question that campaigns will continue to innovate—in how they deliver advertising to voters, in social media, and in other kinds of tactics and strategies. Measuring effectiveness, however, remains a significant challenge.

On the first page of The People’s Choice, the authors write: “Every four years, the country stages a large-scale experiment in political propaganda and public opinion.” This statement reminds us that, however consequential Barack Obama’s victory in 2012 proves to be, this particular election is just one of many that have occurred and will occur. Future elections will likely refine and improve on what we have learned to date.
FOREWORD

Many books are written about presidential elections. Journalists typically write the first accounts after the election. Too often the work of political scientists on this election follows years later, coming out when journalists and politicians are deep into the weeds of the next election. This means that common interpretations of what happened in a particular election and broader analyses of electoral politics outside the academy do not reflect the research done by political scientists because this work comes out too late or is too technical in its presentation.

To some extent blogging has helped bring the views of political scientists to the public earlier. In addition, political campaigns increasingly hire social scientists to conduct analysis while the election is unfolding, but most of that work is proprietary and not publicly available. Finally, prominent journalists, particularly the new breed of wonkier analysts, frequently draw on the work of political scientists to inform their work. But this is all fragmentary and rarely presented in a book that is accessible to the lay public as well as experts.

This book is an effort to bring to the analysis of the 2012 presidential election the insights of first-rate political scientists at a speed that matches the publication of books by journalists while taking advantage of the web to offer first versions of many of the chapters while the election unfolded. By publishing some of the chapters on the web as quickly after events like the primaries and the conventions as possible, the authors and the Press sought to make this analysis part of the current reporting on the election.
We also asked the authors to write in a way that captures the drama of electoral politics for the public. I asked them to tell this as a story with a strong narrative line, a political *telenovela*.

To do this required the authors to give up the traditional process of academic writing with the preparation of papers that are presented to their academic peers at conferences and the writing of peer-reviewed articles, all culminating in a manuscript that itself is reviewed and revised before publication. It required them to jettison as much of the field's technical jargon as possible. It is a bold move for the authors and it is their gamble. Let me be clear that this manuscript was subject to peer review. Indeed we are in debt to the reviewers who agreed to read the manuscript in pieces and understood the audiences inside and outside the academy we wanted to reach. This was supplemented by a kind of crowd-sourcing of the reviewing process, with the authors receiving reactions to the chapters available on the web.

At the same time the Press has taken its own gamble. We made chapters of the book available for free download beginning immediately before the conventions. These chapters stimulated discussion and comments on the ideas the authors put forward as well as on their empirical research on the campaigns and on public opinion. Our hope is that this will highlight the contributions political science can make to our understanding of elections and create better-informed coverage of not only this election but elections in the future. We hope that the free downloads will stimulate interest in the book itself.

Just as the election was a gamble for the parties and the candidates, this book is a gamble for the authors and the Press. It is a gamble that I believe has paid off, but the final verdict is up to you, the readers.

Charles T. Myers,
for Princeton University Press
CHAPTER 1

Ante Up

Here is a number: 68. That is how many moments were described as “game-changers” in the 2012 presidential election, according to an exhaustive search by Tim Murphy, a reporter at Mother Jones magazine. A few of these allegedly game-changing moments were cited in jest. The writer for the Celebritology blog at the Washington Post joked that the troubled actress Lindsay Lohan’s endorsement of Mitt Romney could be a game-changer. A few of these moments were plausibly important, like the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. But the rest of the list is comprised largely of blips that failed to transform the race: the attempted recall of Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, Ann Romney’s speech at the Republican National Convention, the Des Moines Register’s endorsement of Mitt Romney, a video of a Barack Obama speech from 1998, and so on and on. All told, Murphy found that the term “game-changer” had been mentioned almost twenty thousand times in the ten months before the election. It was, according to one reporter, the single worst cliché of the campaign.

The search for “game-changers” may make for grabby headlines, but it does not really help us understand presidential elections in general and the 2012 presidential election in particular. American presidential elections are rarely decided by a single moment that changes everything. Instead, presidential elections depend on national conditions, especially the state of the economy, and the candidates’ efforts to mobilize and persuade voters. Both are important. Our goal in this book is to understand what role these factors, including some of the 68 alleged game-changers, played in deciding the
2012 election and what that might teach us about the dynamics of presidential campaigns. In other words, how and why did Obama win again? Our answer turns more on the advantages incumbent presidents have even in slowly growing economies and less on television advertising or field organizations, although we will investigate the effectiveness of both of these, too. Could Romney have won? To do so, he would have needed large advantages in campaign effort that were hard to achieve in a presidential election that pitted two qualified, well-financed candidates against one another. That neither Romney nor Obama had a large and sustained advantage helps explain how the $2.3 billion that they and their allies spent did not move the polls very much. Presidential campaigns do affect people, but because Obama and Romney matched each other almost dollar for dollar, the effects of this campaign were often in equal and opposite directions.

Choice and Chance

We think of an election outcome as having two ingredients: choice and chance. By choice, we mean the choices that the media make—in terms of who and what to cover, and how to cover them—and the choices that candidates make, such as their message, when and where to run advertisements, and how much to invest in a field organization. By focusing on choice, we zero in on many of the things that were called “game-changers”—if not quite all 68. By chance, we mean the circumstances in which candidates find themselves and over which they have less control, such as how well the economy is doing, who their opponent is, who endorses them, and the balance of Democrats and Republicans in the electorate. We call these circumstances the “fundamentals” of elections. They are the national conditions that set the stage for the campaign. By studying choice and chance simultaneously, we can compare their impact. We can evaluate how much work the fundamentals do to influence elections alongside the work that candidates do to win votes. This helps us answer such questions as: how much campaigning might be necessary to overcome a disadvantage in the fundamentals?

Our story has three central lessons. First, as political science research has long shown, the fundamentals structure outcomes in advance of the campaign. They provide predictability and stability to how people vote and thus to who wins elections. The fundamentals typically do not make for headlines about “game-changers.” But they make a difference. In the Republican primary election, support within the network of party leaders strengthened Romney's campaign and helped him survive a series of challenges from the other candidates. In the general election, people's longstanding identification with a political party was a powerful influence: most people who actually voted knew how they would vote a year before the general election. Moreover, the advantages based on economic fundamentals were hard to dislodge. In 2012, a slowly growing economy was enough to make Obama the favorite, and that advantage was borne out on Election Day.

Second, media coverage and campaign strategies can shift votes, thereby creating volatility in the race. But this happens only when the coverage and campaigning favor one side—such that one candidate dominates the airwaves, for example. In the Republican presidential primary, news coverage and intense campaigning produced instability because lopsided moments occurred often, creating the surges of many different candidates. But in the general election, news coverage and intensive campaigning were accompanied by stability among voters precisely because Obama's and Romney's efforts were so balanced. We liken the general election period to a "dynamic equilibrium," whereby a vigorous and dynamic campaign often produced a stable equilibrium in the polls.

Third, when imbalances during the campaign do occur, their effects are often short-lived. In the primary, the surges of the candidates were sustained by favorable coverage that came after the media's "discovery" of the candidate's potential. But within a few weeks, increased media scrutiny of the surging candidate helped bring about the candidate's decline. In the general election, where the media coverage did not systematically favor either candidate, it was the political advertisements whose effect did not last long. Any advertising advantage that Obama or Romney opened up in the battleground states on a Monday would shift votes in his favor that day. But most of that shift would be gone by Tuesday unless the campaign sustained its advantage. And because both Obama and Romney, combined with their allies, spent roughly a billion dollars each, it was tough for either candidate to dominate the airwaves for long. The Obama and Romney campaigns largely neutralized each other's efforts, leaving Obama, the candidate who benefited most from the underlying fundamentals, the eventual winner.

Our Moneyball Approach to Understanding Political Campaigns

“We're picking up steam,” a tired but enthusiastic Romney campaign staffer told Wveck in September. “The rallies seem really energized. People love him. We're going to win this thing!” According to a top Romney strategist, staff who traveled to battleground state rallies from the campaign's Boston headquarters came back and said the same thing as Election Day approached. One staff member who attended a rally in Philadelphia said, "That is not what
a losing campaign looks like." Yes, it just "felt" like Romney had momentum. But believing in the size of the rallies showed how feelings and gut instinct could lead you astray.

These stories reminded us of Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game. In this book, Michael Lewis describes how Billy Beane, the now famous general manager of the Oakland Athletics, turned baseball into "moneyball" by eschewing expensive superstar players—which the team could not afford given its small payroll—and building a team of bargain players who had undervalued skills. Beane found these players by using data to identify the specific skills that were most important for winning games and then finding lesser-known players who had those skills. His old-fashioned scouts were skeptics of this approach, rejecting the data for what they "knew" in their gut to be true about players.

Today, virtually every baseball team uses advanced statistical analyses to evaluate players, and moneyball has bled into other areas, including elections. More and more, campaigns are not relying on intuition but on data about what does and does not work to persuade and mobilize voters. The Obama campaign pushed further in this direction than any previous campaign. For example, they sent out different fund-raising emails to random groups of supporters to see which subject lines and messages would generate the most contributions. Before these tests, Obama's staff members sometimes bet on which email would be the most effective. As one later reported—in a telling indictment of relying only on instinct—"We basically found our guts were worthless."

Moneyball may have infiltrated campaigns but unfortunately not a great deal of political commentary. The same bits of folklore are trotted out as if they are fact in election after election. For example, "undecided voters break for the challenger" emerged again in 2012, especially among Romney supporters who believed it meant they were destined to win. One of our major motivations in writing this book was to inject a bit of "moneyball" into our understanding of presidential campaigns—to do for explanations of why the winner won what forecasters like the New York Times's Nate Silver or the Huffington Post's (and fellow political scientist) Simon Jackman did to predict who would win. Our approach is deeply informed by data and seeks to test the instincts and pet hypotheses of commentators, practitioners, reporters, and academics alike in a rigorous and scientific manner. The best way to know whether Obama won because of his ground game or Romney lost because he was perceived as an out-of-touch plutocrat is to delve into hard numbers on field organization or voters' perceptions of Romney and estimate their effect, while simultaneously accounting for competing explanations. Other books may spell out why the campaigns did what they did, but The Gamble demonstrates whether what they did made any difference.

Our approach goes beyond firsthand accounts from campaign insiders. While insiders can provide valuable insight into why decisions were made, their assessments of whether those decisions made any difference may be biased. To be fair, a strategist's job is only to win an election. In the heat of a campaign, they do not have the time to conduct a science experiment to figure out what is working. Nevertheless, after the campaign, insiders often act as if they know exactly what worked and why. If their candidate won, the argument too often goes, then clearly what they did worked. They have an incentive to exaggerate the campaign's impact and the genius of their own strategizing. After all, if people perceive them to be brilliant, it helps ensure they get hired when the next election comes around. We are not suggesting that all campaign consultants do this. But the temptation is always there, and it makes relying on only paid strategists to understand how much the campaign affected voters a bit like relying on doctors who are paid by a drug company to tell us whether its new drug works. The incentives for campaign consultants are all wrong.

By contrast, journalists and commentators—who also opine on why an election turned out as it did—are more likely to provide something campaign operatives often cannot or will not: actual scrutiny of what campaigns did and said, which sometimes sheds light on the true consequences of campaigning, including ones that the operatives would prefer to downplay. But journalists also face conflicting incentives. After all, it will not make the front page to write that nothing important is happening on the campaign trail or that the candidate gave the same speech today that he gave yesterday and the day before that. So at times journalists seem to "root for the story"—suggesting that campaign moments may be, could be, might be critical. Maybe even game-changers. As one writer for a major political publication told us during the campaign, "I generally try to spot potential trends before they become conventional wisdom." Of course, trying to "spot potential trends" can mean pushing a dramatic thesis well before the evidence actually backs it up. Journalistic accounts of campaigns also tend to put journalists themselves in the background. These accounts implicitly suggest that journalists are merely observers of the story of an election rather than characters in that story—even though, as we will show, the tenor of news coverage can profoundly affect the public's views of the candidates, especially during primary elections.

In explaining the 2012 election, we take conventional wisdom and political reporting seriously, investigating many campaign moments to see how they may have moved voters. But we also draw on a rich research tradition in political science and other social sciences that evaluates the effects of presidential campaigns. This research identifies patterns that occur and reoccur over many elections, giving us a sense of what to look for and where to look
for it. Indeed, we are but one in a long series of political science studies of individual elections, stretching back to the 1940 presidential race.

We draw on multitudes of data from the 2012 election and previous elections. Historical data on the economy, presidential approval, and presidential election outcomes. Data from hundreds of public polls. Data on the individual opinions of approximately 45,000 voters who were interviewed three times in YouGov polls—once in December 2011, once again between January and Election Day, and once again after the election. Data on campaign news coverage in roughly 13,000 different outlets, including how often they reported on each candidate and how favorable or unfavorable that coverage was. Data on the millions of political advertisements aired, including when they aired, where they aired, and how many were on the air. Data on the location of candidate field offices.

These data enable us to document quantitatively the state of the economy and other fundamentals, the volume and tenor of news coverage, the ad blitzes and ground game in the battleground states, and the shifts (or not) in the polls. These data allow us to arrive at firmer conclusions about why things happened and especially why Obama won. They allow us to adjudicate among alternative explanations. In these data we will find many correlations, but we aim to go beyond these relationships to figure out which correlations are more likely to imply causation. Adjudicating among explanations also means going beyond plottitudes like “campaigns matter at the margins” or “in close elections, campaigns can make the difference.” We will present much more specific estimates: if Obama aired 1,000 ads in a media market and Romney aired none, how many points did that earn Obama in the polls if nothing else changed? The result is a picture that—whether or not it confirms earlier political science research, folklore, conventional wisdom, or casual pandering—is empirically richer and more robust.

None of this is to suggest that quantitative data can answer every question about the effects of a campaign. Campaigns are not experiments. Often we cannot easily sort out correlation from causation or we simply do not have the exact data we need. Although the Obama campaign was willing to conduct small-scale experiments with fund-raising emails, neither they nor the Romney campaign was conducting large-scale experiments with campaign messages or campaign advertising. Campaigns do not place ads randomly and evaluate whether voters who saw ads voted differently than voters who did not see them. They place ads where they need votes or, more precisely, where they have some chance of gaining votes. Because campaigns are strategic our job is harder and our analyses will come with some uncertainty.

Furthermore, although we can measure a lot of what happened and whether or how it appeared to affect the election’s outcome, we cannot know what would have happened if various events had never occurred. Absent a time machine and the ability to rerun an election under different conditions, we cannot observe the counterfactual path that never materialized. But we can make educated guesses about how alternative scenarios might have played out. We can do things like estimate how many more ads Romney would have had to run to beat Obama, how many fewer field offices Obama could have had and still beat Romney, or whether Obama’s barrage of advertising about Romney’s time at Bain Capital really defined him. In addressing these questions, we can never know for sure what might have been, but data help us evaluate the plausibility of different scenarios.

The Primaries

In primary elections, the candidates are often relatively unfamiliar and voters cannot use their own identification with a political party to choose among the candidates. Because of this, they rely on other information, which is supplied by the news media and the candidates’ electioneering. Unlike in general elections, the news media and electioneering are often imbalanced. At different points in time, one candidate may receive much more, and more favorable, news coverage than the others. Some candidates have enough money to run well-funded, professional campaigns, while others are running campaigns on a shoestring budget. As a result, when voters are inundated with information favoring one of the candidates, they often gravitate toward that candidate. In 2012, that happened repeatedly, creating so many ups and downs that the polls seemed almost random. But there was an underlying logic at work.

The surges by candidates like Rick Perry, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum followed a pattern we call “discovery, scrutiny, and decline.” A salient event, like Perry’s entry into the race or Cain’s victory in the Florida straw poll, drew the media’s attention to a candidate they had largely ignored to that point. The “discovery” of this candidate generated a spike in media coverage and a corresponding spike in the candidate’s poll numbers. But as a front-runner or at least a strong contender, the candidate soon attracted scrutiny from the news media and his opponents alike. As the tenor of the news coverage became less favorable—revealing, for example, evidence that Cain had sexually harassed women as head of the National Restaurant Association—the candidate’s poll numbers began to slip. The result was an often irreversible decline in both news coverage and poll numbers. Looked at this way, the ups and downs in the 2012 primary polls become comprehensible.

Romney, however, did not experience these ups and downs. Underneath the media-driven volatility, the fundamentals of primary elections—in
particular, the support of other party leaders—advantaged Romney. For one, although many Republican leaders did not formally endorse any of their party’s presidential candidates, Romney had much more support among party leaders than did the other candidates. For another, his campaign was better funded and more professionalized than Gingrich’s or Santorum’s. For yet another, he was actually the most popular candidate among the largest factions in the party, which tend not to be the most conservative factions. Gingrich and Santorum each won a few primaries and caucuses only in states where the electorate was more conservative and, even then, only when some fortuitous news coverage or extra elbow grease on the campaign trail made them especially visible to voters. But after Gingrich or Santorum won, the reaction among party leaders ranged from deafening silence to outright alarm. In part because of this, Gingrich and Santorum never had enough resources to build a campaign that could compete effectively with Romney’s in state after state, and particularly in states where the electorate was not as favorable to them. Campaigning and media coverage alone could not help the other candidates neutralize Romney’s advantage.

The General Election

Once the general election campaign began, however, much of the volatility was replaced with stability. In large part, this stemmed from the power of partisanship, one of the fundamentals of presidential elections and American politics generally. In 2012, partisans were very loyal, and the vast majority stuck with their party’s candidate throughout the campaign.

A second important fundamental factor was the national economy. The economy structures many things about presidential elections: who decides to run in the first place, what the candidates talk about, and ultimately who wins. Incumbent presidents and parties do better as the economy grows more rapidly in election years. One of the biggest misconceptions of the 2012 election was that the economy unequivocally disadvantaged Obama. True, the economy was not growing robustly and had not escaped the shadow of the 2007-9 recession and financial crisis. But it was growing at a rate that, based on the previous sixty-plus years of presidential elections, was sufficient to predict an Obama victory. It was never going to be a landslide, or even 2008 all over again. Nevertheless, given the economic growth in 2012, Obama was the favorite.

Where, then, does the campaign—the choices of the candidates—fit in if voters are predictably partisan and the economy strongly influences election outcomes? First, we show that the 2012 campaign, like many before it, helped ensure that both partisanship and the economy remained fundamental. During the campaign, partisans became increasingly enthusiastic about the candidate they were already supporting or predisposed to support. Democrats came to like Obama more, and Republicans came to like Romney more. There were moments when some partisans wavered: for Republicans, after the video of Romney’s comments about “the 47%” was released; for Democrats, after the first presidential debate, in which Obama was perceived to have performed poorly. But subsequent events brought these wavering partisans back into the fold: for Republicans, the first debate; for Democrats, the later debates. Meanwhile, among voters who were initially undecided, not only partisanship but their views of the economy became more salient as the campaign wore on. Partisanship and the economy tend to make elections predictable, and that tendency often becomes stronger as the campaign rolls along. The campaign in 2012 reinforced the stability in the electorate instead of weakening it.

Second, campaign activity itself—the ads, field organizations, and so on—moved votes. But it was difficult for one candidate to move enough votes to shift the polls or, ultimately, to win the election outright. Although commentators were often looking for the one hard-hitting ad that would somehow stay with voters all the way to the ballot box, we find that most of the effects of ads wore off quickly, within a day. Furthermore, unlike in the Republican primary, where there were big differences in how much money the candidates had raised and thus whether they could afford a robust campaign, Obama, Romney, and their respective allies each spent roughly the same amount of money. Thus it was rare for one side to get a large advantage over the other side. Even when one side had more ads on the air than the other—as Obama did in May and June and Romney did in the week before Election Day—it was impossible to dominate completely. The vigorous efforts of both sides were in large part canceling each other out.

Presidential elections are like a game of tug-of-war. Both sides are pulling very hard. If, for some reason, one side let go—meaning they stopped campaigning—then the other side would soon benefit. But of course the candidates do not let go and that makes it hard to see that their efforts are making a difference. That the polls are not moving may seem to suggest that the two campaigns are ineffective. We argue that it means they are equally effective.

This tug-of-war metaphor also implies something very different than a view of campaigns focused on “game-changers.” The continual search for game-changers treats a campaign like a boxing match, where the momentum may be shifting back and forth with every punch and the knockout blow could come at any moment. In reality, there are few knockout punches, and most game-changers do not really change the game that much. Even Obama’s early attacks on Romney’s time at Bain Capital or the 47% video was not as
important as some reporting and commentary suggested. We might call these moments “game-samers” instead.

We have titled this book The Gamble because it described the election on many levels. A gamble is just a bet on an uncertain outcome, like whether the roulette wheel stops at red or black. As the 2012 campaign got under way, there were at least three bets being made. One was by Democrats, who were betting on an incumbent who, while arguably the favorite, was still facing challenging economic times and a pessimistic public. One was by Republicans, who were betting on which of their many candidates could do something rare: defeat a sitting incumbent president. And one was by voters, who were betting on which candidate would best help the country recover from the worst economic recession in over seventy years.

The title has one more meaning. Although like most academics we typically work slowly, we wanted political science to be part of the conversation about this election as it was happening, not years later. So we have tried to write a scientific book about the election in real time, thinking that it would bring a perspective worth considering. That is our gamble.
CHAPTER 7
The Winning Hand

Why did Barack Obama win the 2012 presidential election? Was it that he ran a "great campaign" or even a "formidable campaign"—one with "a much more potent organizational arsenal than in 2008"? Or was it something specific that he did? Was it that he "articulated a set of values that define America that the majority of us wish to live in"? Was it "spending an enormous amount of money to discredit Romney in the swing states" during the spring and summer? Or maybe Obama just gave "gifts" to crucial constituencies like "the African-American community, the Hispanic community, and young people."

Why did Mitt Romney lose the 2012 presidential election? Was it because he "ran a bad campaign"? Was it that he failed "to sell voters on the candidate's personal qualities and leadership gifts"? Was it that he "really screwed up on the immigration issue" by moving too far to the right and alienating Latinos? Or was he not conservative enough—"a meandering managerial moderate"? Or maybe "any explanation that centers on Mitt Romney is mistaken." Perhaps "Romney was not a drag on the Republican party" but "the Republican party was a drag on him." And what was the party's problem? Was it that some Republicans' comments about abortion, same-sex marriage, and racial minorities suggested that the party was just "mean" and "nasty"? Or was Romney's loss beyond even the party's control, as a "demographic time bomb" blew up in its face?

The weeks and months after the 2012 election saw these and many other explanations put forth by politicians, commentators, and journalists. After any election, such explanations quickly ossify into conventional wisdom and

therefore history, becoming the things that "everyone knows" mattered in an election. Our goal is to assess some of these explanations in light of our arguments thus far and systematic data about voters and campaign activity. We do not evaluate every explanation, but we can begin to shed light on some of them.

We have already begun to do so in chapters 5 and 6. The postmortems that emerged after the election confirmed much of what we have already argued. For example, despite the credit that Obama's early advertising received, the Obama campaign's own data mirrored our finding that the ads never really moved the polls. Here is Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, four days after the election:

What's been interesting to watch is that our data has been remarkably consistent really from last spring forward, and our battleground polls really didn't fluctuate much. There were times when it would dip to where we had a 2-point lead in the battleground states. There's one poll over the course that we had a 1-point lead. By and large, we've been 3 and 4 points ahead in the battleground polls.1

David Simas, the Obama campaign's director of opinion research, said the same thing.2 And despite hopes (or fears) that the 47% video would be Romney's undoing, Obama's campaign did not see it as all that momentous either. Obama's deputy campaign manager, Stephanie Cutter, said that whatever small fraction of voters moved away from Romney after the video's release eventually came back to him: "No one believed us at the time. We were saying that as this two percent moved away from Romney it wasn't ours. The race was closer than people thought at the time."3 This is precisely what we found: Republicans who shifted away from Romney after the video's release came back to him after the first debate.

Now we tackle several different explanations. We selected these based in part on the sixty-plus years of political science research on American presidential elections. It gave us a sense of which explanations were likely to have merit. We also selected some of the explanations offered by pundits, commentators, and the two campaigns themselves in the weeks after the election. These explanations were often stated as fact but were really no more than conjecture. We want to know how much truth they contain. We consider six explanations in particular, acknowledging that these are not exhaustive. Our argument, in a nutshell, is this:

• Political and economic fundamentals. The campaign made partisanship and the economy even more salient to voters than they already were, and this arguably helped Obama win.
“Gifts” to key partisan constituencies. Contrary to what some commentators and Romney himself said, the Obama administration’s support for the auto “bailout,” for reproductive rights and contraception, and for granting residency status to children of illegal immigrants did not appear crucial to shoring up support among the Democratic constituencies who may have favored these policies—the Rust Belt working class, women, and Latinos, respectively.

Romney’s “severe conservatism.” Some commentators suggested Romney moved so far to the right to appeal to conservative voters in the Republican primary that he damaged his appeal among general election voters. But in the general election it was actually Obama, not Romney, who was ideologically further from the most voters. Romney’s “extreme” ideology did not appear to be a significant factor in his loss.

Likability and empathy. Commentators also pointed to Romney’s deficits in terms of whether voters liked him and believed he understood their problems. The campaign closed some of these gaps, and those that remained were not large enough to cost Romney the race. Had he been perceived as favorably as Obama, he likely would have lost anyway.

Race and religion. Negative attitudes toward African Americans appeared to depress support for Obama in the 2008 election, and we find that the same was true in 2012. But attitudes toward Mormons had a much smaller effect on support for Romney.

Obama’s “formidable” campaign. The ads and field organizations of the campaign made a small difference to the outcome but did not decide the election. Eliminating any advantages Obama or Romney had in terms of the air war and the ground game likely would have left Obama’s victory intact.

It is tempting to believe that one can isolate each of these factors, estimate its precise effect on the election’s outcome, and then add up these effects to something like a “recipe” for Obama’s victory—a tablespoon of economic fundamentals, a teaspoon of empathy, and . . . vayla! But any election is too complex a phenomenon for cookbook precision. Our goal is more modest: to offer plausible evidence about whether these factors mattered and, if so, rough estimates of how much they mattered. Our estimates are necessarily rough because often we are addressing hypotheticals like “What if Romney had been considered as empathetic as Obama?” or “What if Romney had matched Obama’s ground game?” We will never know the answers to such questions. Had these things been true, the campaign would likely have been different in other ways that we cannot anticipate or account for. So we try to be appropriately cautious about our evidence.

Nevertheless, even a little progress toward evaluating these explanations helps separate fact from folklore as we seek to identify what exactly was in Obama’s winning hand.

The Fundamentals

To understand Obama’s victory, the first place to begin is “the fundamentals”—the central political and economic factors that undergird voters’ choices and election outcomes. We have argued that Obama was forecast to win on the basis of these fundamentals alone, and that forecast was borne out on November 6. However, the success of the forecast was not preordained. Had the candidates made different choices or had things gone differently during the campaign, our forecast, as well as several others, might have been wrong. But that did not happen in 2012.

A simple but telling illustration of the role of economic fundamentals in this and earlier presidential elections is displayed in Figure 7. Here we compare presidential election outcomes from 1948 to 2012 to the change in gross domestic product during the first two quarters of the election year. The diagonal line captures the relationship between economic conditions and election outcomes for all years except 2012. If 2012 were close to what we would predict based on this historical relationship, it should fall close to that diagonal line. And indeed it does. To be sure, there is no reason to suspect that this one economic statistic would provide such an accurate forecast every election year. But nothing about 2012 was out of line with the forecast.6

The forecasting model that we described in chapter 2 was also accurate. This model combined growth in gross domestic product with changes in two other economic indicators—unemployment and real disposable income—as well as presidential approval and an indicator for whether the incumbent’s party had occupied the White House for only one consecutive term (as was true in 2012) or more than one term. Based on where these factors stood at the end of 2011, our forecast was that Obama would win almost 52% of the major-party vote (that is, the vote for either the Democratic or Republican candidate, excluding third parties). Based on some plausible guesses of what presidential approval and economic growth would be in the first half of the election year itself, our forecast was that Obama would win 52.9% of the vote. We can now go back and generate a forecast based on what presidential approval and economic growth actually were. That forecast gives Obama 52.7% of the vote.7 In actuality, Obama won almost 52% of the major-party vote—a figure slightly lower than our forecast but well in line with it.8
The slowly growing economy.
- A high degree of party loyalty among "decided voters."
- A group of "persuadable" voters large enough to decide the election.
- A campaign centered on the economy.
- A Democratic advantage in party identification and thus potentially among voters.

We will discuss the first four of these in turn, saving the fifth for later.

The slowly growing economy. As of December 2011, the economy was growing, but not quickly. For our forecast to be accurate, the economy needed to remain in a fairly steady state. Had there been a large economic shock of some kind, one that our forecasting model failed to capture, then the outcome could have been different than what we predicted.

That did not come to pass. Economic trends during 2012 might be best described as "more of the same." There was never a point at which the economy plunged back toward a recession or began to grow rapidly. In the first half of 2012, the economy slowed somewhat, as we discussed in chapter 5. The small increase in unemployment in April was perhaps the most visible manifestation of the slowdown. Had this slowdown continued, it might have put Obama's reelection in doubt. Instead, beginning in August, the economy began to rebound. The improvement is visible in Figure 7.2, which shows the

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**Figure 7.1.**
Note: The relationship between change in GDP and the vote—the diagonal line—is estimated without the 2012 election included. This shows how close the 2012 outcome was to what we would predict based on the historical relationship between GDP and the vote from 1948 to 2008.

In fact, the election's outcome was not much different than where the polls stood almost a year before it. When YouGov surveyed 45,000 Americans in December 2011—well before the general election and before the factors in our forecasting model were even in place—Obama garnered 52% of the vote among registered voters who preferred Obama or Romney, almost exactly his major-party vote share on Election Day. But it was no given that this 52% figure would remain consistent throughout the election year, thereby rendering our forecast accurate. By taking stock of the economic and political landscape in December 2011, we can identify what would have needed to happen to change the polls and, perhaps, render our forecast inaccurate. Five features of the landscape stand out:

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**Figure 7.2.**
Election-year trends in the national economy.
Data are from the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.
monthly change in real disposable income and the monthly unemployment rate. Both improved in the fall. For example, the unemployment rate dropped from 8.1% to 7.8% in September. The monthly jobs reports had already been attracting significant news coverage—even though these reports present early estimates that often end up being revised—but this one seemed more dramatic, especially since it helped change the subject after Obama was judged to have performed so poorly in the first debate.

But more notable is just how stable the economy was. Consider the change in gross domestic product, the indicator we present in Figure 7.1. It grew 1% in the third quarter of 2011 and 0.5% in the fourth quarter—about the time when Obama claimed 52% of the major-party vote in the December poll. In 2011, GDP grew 0.3% in the first quarter but 0.8% in the third—a bit slower than in late 2011 but not so much slower that the economy appeared headed toward recession. Throughout the campaign, there was much speculation as to whether late changes in the economy would reshape the presidential race. This has rarely been the case. As Robert Erikson and Christopher Wlezien noted in their study of presidential elections from 1952 to 2008, “the economic cake is baked” relatively early in the election year. Had there been a major shock—for example, a sudden outbreak of war in an oil-producing region produced a large spike in gas prices—then perhaps the cake would have needed to bake a bit longer, as it were. But those shocks are uncommon. From the standpoint of election forecasting, even the financial crisis in the fall of 2008 was less of a shock than it might seem because the economy had already been in a recession for ten months at that point (of course, the crisis was important in many other ways). The predictability of the 2012 election hinged on the stability of the economy throughout the election year.

Party loyalty among the “decided” voters. When asked about a hypothetical Obama-Romney matchup in December 2011, Democrats and Republicans were already remarkably loyal partisans. About 80% of each party’s voters chose their party’s candidate. So for the state of the race in December to resemble that on Election Day, these decided voters needed to stick with that decision and remain faithful to their party. Had there been numerous defections in a direction that benefited either Romney or Obama then the outcome may have deviated from what voters said in December and from forecasts like ours. As it turned out, the behavior of decided voters manifested impressive stability, and the small number of defections did not overwhelmingly benefit either candidate. In fact, decided voters brought their political attitudes more in line with their party identification and vote intentions as the campaign went on. That campaigns reinforce partisanship is a decades-old finding in the political science literature, and 2012 was no exception.

<table>
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<th>December 2011</th>
<th>December 2012</th>
<th>Did not vote</th>
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<td>Obama (%)</td>
<td>Romney (%)</td>
<td>Other (%)</td>
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<td>All respondents</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
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<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>70</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>74</td>
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Self-reported voters

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<th>December 2012</th>
<th>Did not vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obama (%)</td>
<td>Romney (%)</td>
<td>Other (%)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Undecided</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data are from YouGov polls. YouGov polled 44,998 people in December 2011 and then reinterviewed 35,489 of them after the November 6 election. Independents who lean toward a party are coded as partisans.

Table 7.1 depicts the stability of decided voters by comparing the vote intentions of YouGov respondents who were originally interviewed in December 2011 with their actual choices in the election, as they reported when interviewed again later in November 2012. Among those who identified as Obama supporters in December 2011, 74% reported voting for him, 22%
reported not voting, and only 2% reported voting for Romney. Romney supporters in December 2011 were very similar: 77% voted for him, 17% did not vote, and only 4% voted for Obama. Thus, although not every supporter ended up voting, it was rare for voters to end up voting for the candidate they did not already prefer in December. This is even clearer when we examine only self-reported voters. Among those who supported Obama in December, 95% voted for him in November. Romney supporters were similarly loyal (92%). A small fraction of voters changed their minds: about 3% switched from Obama to Romney, and 5% from Romney to Obama—thereby providing a small benefit for Obama (less than 1 point of vote share). Ultimately, it was possible to predict how the vast majority of Americans would vote from what they said ten months before the actual election.

Much of this stability illustrates the power of partisanship in contemporary American politics. We have emphasized that most voters are partisans and most partisans end up supporting their presidential candidate. That was true in 2012, much as in other recent presidential elections. As Table 7.1 shows, 89% of Democrats who reported voting chose Obama, and 88% of Republicans who reported voting chose Romney—rates higher than in December 2011, which also suggests something about the behavior of the undecided voters we will discuss momentarily. The rate of partisan loyalty among voters in the exit poll was slightly higher: 92% among Democrats and 93% among Republicans. (The exit poll does not ascertain whether independents lean toward a party, so their measure of partisanship differs from ours.) According to the exit poll, party loyalty was even higher in 2012 than in 2008.

Such stability and predictability did not mean that the campaign was irrelevant. When partisans wavered, as some Republicans did after the release of the 47% video, campaign events helped reinforce their partisan inclination. The campaign also helped ensure partisans' loyalty by bringing other attitudes in line with partisanship. One example was candidate favorability. Among people who, as of December 2011, already supported Obama and then were reinterviewed during the last two weeks of the campaign, strongly favorable views of Obama increased by 8 points (from 60% to 68%) and strongly unfavorable views of Romney increased by 27 points (from 39% to 66%). The same polarization was evident among early Romney supporters. Their views of Obama did not change much—78% already had strongly unfavorable views of him in December—but strongly favorable views of Romney increased 26 points (from 30% to 56%). These shifts show how people react to new information in ways that conform to their preexisting opinions: if you were an early Obama supporter, most of what you learned about Mitt Romney during the presidential campaign made you oppose him all the more. Early Romney supporters had the opposite reaction.

Views of the economy also manifested this same pattern of polarization. As a result, trends in economic perceptions depended more on partisanship and vote intentions than the actual objective economy. Relying on the vote intention respondents originally stated in December 2011, Figure 7.3 displays the trends for Obama supporters, Romney supporters, and persuadable voters. (The results are similar if we compare Democrats, independents, and Republicans.) Obama supporters came to have more favorable views of the economy as the campaign progressed. This was not in response to actual economic events, such as the poor May jobs report or the encouraging September jobs report. The economic perceptions of Obama supporters actually began to improve before the drop in unemployment. The key event was the Democratic National Convention. In the YouGov poll fielded over the weekend before the convention, 43% of Obama supporters said that the economy was getting better. The weekend after the convention, 54% said so. A week later, 60% said so. That fraction remained fairly constant for the rest of the campaign.12
Romney supporters moved in the opposite direction. They became more pessimistic in the wake of the May jobs report and this trend continued throughout the rest of the campaign. The September jobs report had no real impact on them. In fact, many did not believe it. On the Friday the report was released, former General Electric CEO Jack Welch tweeted, "Unbelievable jobs numbers ... these Chicago guys will do anything ... can't debate so change numbers." His suggestion of a government conspiracy—"Chicago guys" referred to Obama's campaign headquarters—was widely circulated. An October poll found that 89% of Republicans believed that the unemployment statistics had been manipulated, compared to only 23% of Democrats. Partisanship affected not only how people perceived the economy but whether they thought partisanship had corrupted the measurement of the economy. Both findings demonstrate how partisanship filtered information during this campaign, as in politics generally, and helped keep "decided" voters from changing their minds.

Persuadable voters. Obama's 52% of the December vote was only among respondents who preferred Obama or Romney. They were the majority of respondents but not all: 10% of registered voters, and 19% of all respondents, were undecided or preferred one of the other candidates in the race. These were the "persuadable voters," as we have called them. The question is why these persuadable voters ended up voting as they did. As of December, they were evenly balanced in their partisanship: 26% were Republicans, 47% independents, and 27% Democrats. They were somewhat pessimistic about the economy: 44% said it was getting worse, 47% said it was the same, and 8% said it was getting better. Their views of Obama were slightly more favorable than their views of Romney, but more striking is the fraction that had no opinion of Obama (35%) or Romney (41%). In December 2011, they truly seemed up for grabs. What these voters decided would affect how well the fundamentals forecast the outcome.

As Table 7.1 illustrates, many of them did not vote, but among those who did most chose either Romney or Obama, including those who originally said they preferred some other candidate. In fact, they were evenly split between Obama and Romney: 43% to 40%. (This belies the hoary conventional wisdom that undecided voters always "break for the challenger"—a rule that was widely debunked before 2012 but was still in regular circulation during the campaign.) The even split of these voters helped ensure that neither Romney nor Obama gained much advantage from them.

The main reason these voters split evenly was because they arrived at a predictable decision—one largely consistent with their partisanship. Although many of these voters harbored concerns about their party's candidate, as we noted in chapter 5, the campaign appeared to allay those concerns.

Persuadable voters who were interviewed in December and then again in the last two weeks of the campaign became more favorable toward their party's candidate. In December, only 10% of persuadable Democrats had a very favorable opinion of Obama, but by the end 39% did. Most of the rest, 32%, had a "somewhat" favorable view. If we combine the "very" and "somewhat" categories, Obama's "favorables" increased nearly 30 points among persuadable Democrats—not to a level equal to that of Democrats who initially supported Obama but certainly to a level that made supporting Obama more palatable. The movement of persuadable Democrats to Obama was aided by their deteriorating views of Romney. In December, only 38% had a very or somewhat unfavorable view of Romney; 33% had no opinion. By the end of the campaign, 58% had an unfavorable view, and only 15% had no opinion. Persuadable Republicans behaved similarly: Romney's favorables jumped 19 points over the course of the campaign, while views of Obama—already unfavorable to begin with—became even more so.

Persuadable Democrats also came to hold views of the economy that were more in line with their partisanship. As Figure 7.3 shows, views of persuadable voters as a whole became, at most, a bit more positive during the campaign. This was largely because Democrats became less pessimistic: in December 2011, 40% said the economy was getting worse, 47% said it was the same, and 13% said it was getting better. By the end of the campaign, only 12% said the economy was getting worse, 70% said it was the same, and 18% said it was better. Persuadable Republicans and independents did not change their views. At the end of the campaign, 55% of these Republicans thought that the economy was getting worse, as did 42% of these independents. The majority of these independents, 52%, thought that the economy was about the same.

Given how partisanship came to shape persuadable voters' views of the candidates and the economy, it is not surprising that it shaped their votes as well. Among persuadable Democrats who reported voting, 71% ended up supporting Obama, 16% Romney, and the rest someone else. Among persuadable Republican voters, 69% ended up supporting Romney and 14% Obama. Persuadable independent voters broke 42%-31% in favor of Obama. We can track the increasing impact of partisanship on the vote intentions of persuadable voters by calculating the relationship between partisanship, measured in December, and vote intentions in each month before the election (further details are in the appendix). The top half of Figure 7.4 shows how the effect of partisanship, while important even in January, increased across these ten months. Because persuadable Republicans turned out at a higher rate than persuadable independents or Democrats, the combination of these three groups produced the 41%-40% split in Table 7.1. Predictable partisanship among both decided and persuadable voters was the norm.
We can go one step further to identify potential reasons why partisanship became more relevant for these persuadable voters. Thus far, we have been talking about how "the campaign" helped accentuate partisanship. But what about the campaign itself? Was it the ads, fieldwork, and other campaigning in the battleground states? Or was the increased relevance of partisanship a nationwide phenomenon—one perhaps attributable to the news coverage, debates, and other information that reached all the states? Using the post-election interviews, we compared how persuadable voters of different partisan stripes voted, both in battleground states and non-battleground states. Living in a battleground state did not matter much for persuadable Republicans. But it did matter for persuadable Democrats—increasing their support of Obama by 7 points (to 76% in the battleground states from 69% in the other states). And it mattered for persuadable independents as well but in the opposite direction: they were about 7 points less likely to support Obama and 3 points more likely to support Romney (with the remaining difference going to another candidate). All told, Obama did about 4 points better among persuadable voters in the battleground states than in the other states.

A campaign centered on the economy. The relationship between economic fundamentals and election outcomes—depicted in Figure 7.1—may not be inevitable. It may depend on the campaign. That campaigns can make fundamental factors more salient is a mainstay of the academic research on campaigns. But this also depends on the decisions of the candidates themselves. In the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore was reticent to run on the Clinton administration's record, even though Clinton had presided over robust economic growth. Gore's campaign focused on issues besides the economy, largely domestic policy, and he ended up underperforming the economic fundamentals (see Figure 7.1) and ultimately losing the Electoral College. There was little chance of this in 2012, however, as we discussed in chapter 5. Both Obama and Romney centered their campaign messages on the economy, and it was prominent in news coverage as well.

Because of this, the relationship between people's initial views of the economy and their vote intentions should have become stronger over the course of the campaign. That is, views of the economy should have become a stronger influence on people's decision about whether to support Obama or Romney. This should be especially true for persuadable voters, whose views were not initially as strongly anchored by partisanship—although they became more so as the campaign went on. We examined the effect of views of the economy on the vote intentions of persuadable voters in each month from January through October, using the entire set of YouGov polls at our disposal. (Again, the appendix to this chapter provides further detail.) The bottom half of Figure 7.4 shows the trend in the estimated effect of economic evaluations.

As with party identification, the effect of economic evaluations strengthened over the course of the campaign. From January through April, the effects were small. But in May, the effect nearly doubled in size. It then peaked in July before falling somewhat in the fall, though remaining meaningful throughout. To envision what these numbers mean, imagine a measure that ranged a total of 100 points—with someone who intended to vote for Romney scored 0, someone who intended to vote for Obama scored 100, and someone who
was undecided or preferred another candidate scored in between, at 59. As of October, our results suggest that people who believed the economy was getting better would score 30 points more favorable to Obama on this scale relative to someone who thought the economy was getting worse.

An interesting question is why the effect was largest in July, especially since the bulk of the campaign advertising occurred in the fall. One reason is that the battleground state campaigning did not appear to make the economy more salient to voters. The effect of economic evaluations on vote intentions was not greater in battleground states than in other states. A second, and admittedly speculative, reason has to do with how voters respond to economic bad news versus economic good news. In particular, they seem far more responsive to bad news. For example, incumbents tend to be punished more for economic downturns than they are rewarded for economic growth. This is relevant to 2012 because, as Figure 7a demonstrates, the late spring and summer saw some of the worst economic news of the year, but the news began to improve in the fall. This may explain why the economy seemed more salient to persuadable voters earlier in the general election campaign than later.

Obama’s victory was not necessarily unpredictable or surprising given the fundamentals. Such a statement might seem to suggest that the campaign did not matter at all. But that is not our argument. Several things could have gone off-track during the campaign to make that forecast wrong. One was the economy itself, but instead it continued plodding along—not growing quickly but growing quickly enough to reelect an incumbent. Another concerned partisanship: had significant numbers of decided or persuadable voters deserted from the party they identified with, and especially if the defections had favored Obama or Romney, the ultimate outcome would have been less predictable. But as is typically true in presidential elections, the campaign itself helped ensure that did not happen. Finally, during the campaign, the economy itself became more salient to persuadable voters, although not necessarily as a direct result of campaigning by Romney and Obama. Had events made some other issue salient—as a terrorist attack could have made foreign policy and national security salient—a forecast based on economic indicators could have been wrong.

The key point is that fundamentals influence elections in part because the campaign brings them to the foreground. In some sense, the 2012 campaign helped “make” pre-election predictions like ours come true. It is noteworthy, too, that our argument conforms to what the campaigns were seeing. Here is one description of internal data from the Obama campaign:

For the most part, however, the analytic tables demonstrated how stable the electorate was, and how predictable individual voters could be. Polls from the media and academic institutions may have fluctuated by the hour, but drawing on hundreds of data points to judge whether someone was a likely voter proved more reliable than using a seven-question battery like Gallup’s to do the same. “When you see this Pogo stick happening with the public data—the electorate is just not that volatile,” says Mitch Stewart, director of the Democratic campaign group Organizing for America. The analytic data offered a source of calm.

Emphasis ours.

The “Gifts”

About a week after the election, Mitt Romney held a conference call with fund-raisers and donors to his campaign. He credited Obama’s victory to “gifts” that the Obama administration had given Democratic constituencies—“especially the African-American community, the Hispanic community, and young people.” Romney went on to single out such policy “gifts” as “forgiveness of college loan interests,” “free contraceptives,” and “Obamacare” as mobilizing young people. He cited Obamacare as mobilizing black and Hispanic voters. He also suggested that “the amnesty for children of illegals”—Obama’s June 15 decision to allow children of illegal immigrants to live and work in the United States without fear of deportation—“helped Obama with Latinos.”

Romney’s argument was readily criticized, even by Republicans. Newt Gingrich called it “just nuts.” On Meet the Press, Senator Lindsay Graham said, “We’re in a big hole. We’re not getting out of it by comments like that. When you’re in a hole, stop digging. He keeps digging.” But Romney’s argument was actually much more widely accepted than these comments would suggest. Numerous postmortems suggested that the Republican Party needed to soften its stance on immigration and moderate on issues like contraception and abortion.

Underlying these prescisions is what we might call the “what have you done for me lately?” theory of voting behavior: the notion that demographic groups choose candidates based on whether the candidate is better for their members’ self-interest. Under this theory, certain demographic groups supported Obama for idiosyncratic reasons. Young women gravitated to Obama because of his stance on contraception. Latinos gravitated to Obama because of his stance on immigration and health care reform. Working-class voters in Rust Belt states gravitated to Obama because the government bailed out General Motors and Chrysler. And so on.
There are two problems with this argument, however. The first is that social science research has struggled to show that self-interest affects all political attitudes. People are more likely to ground their attitudes in broader political predispositions and values. So whether they supported the Affordable Care Act, for example, was less about whether the act would "give" them health care and more about whether they supported government regulation generally or, even more simply, identified as Democrats. The second problem is that the "what have you done for me lately?" theory overestimates the relevance of the idiosyncrasies of individual groups and underestimates the broader national trends that affect all groups in similar ways. Campaigns often worry about what needs to be done to "shore up" loyalties among various groups, and advances in micro-targeting suggest that they can send groups of voters messages tailored directly to them. But national forces that are largely out of the candidates' control, like the economy, also move groups around and arguably more so.

The evidence for these national forces can be seen in how similarly groups shifted between 2008 and 2012. The "swing" between these two elections was remarkably uniform across groups. Figure 7.5 shows Obama's margin among thirty-five different demographic groups in the 2008 and 2012 exit polls. If his margin were identical in each year within a particular group, that group's data point would fall right on top of the diagonal line. Most groups are below this line—indicating that Obama did worse among almost every group in 2012 relative to 2008, largely because the fundamentals did not work as strongly in his favor. When confronted with a pattern like this, Occam's razor suggests focusing on what groups had in common rather than supposing that most of them moved in similar ways but for completely different reasons.

Nevertheless, it is worth delving more deeply into the behavior of several of these groups, particularly ones that Romney believed received "gifts." Part of the reason is that at least one of these groups, Latinos, apparently bucked the trend: they were more supportive of Obama in 2012 than in 2008. And part of the reason is one other finding from political science research on self-interest and public opinion: self-interest can be a bigger influence on political attitudes when the benefits of policies are clear, visible, and tangible. One could argue that the gifts Obama allegedly gave to Democratic constituencies met this definition. We will examine three constituencies in particular: working-class voters who could have benefited from the auto bailout, women who may have supported the Obama administration's policies on contraception and abortion, and Latinos who may have supported health care reform and the Obama administration's immigration policy.

The Rust Belt and the auto bailout. Did the government loans to General Motors and Chrysler help Obama win votes in crucial battleground states like Ohio? In the wake of the election, many people thought so. Writing from Columbus, USA Today's Dennis Caufack began his story thusly: "President Obama won the nation's most important swing state Tuesday with the help of one controversial issue—the auto bailout." The main evidence for this claim was: Obama won Ohio, the majority of Ohio voters in the exit poll said they supported the auto bailout, and Obama did better among union households in Ohio relative to 2008.

But that is circumstantial evidence at best. Just because a majority of Ohioans said they supported the bailout does not mean that it was the cause of their vote. Better evidence would come from examining Obama's actual vote share in the Rust Belt and whether it was higher in places where there were auto plants. That is a much more precise measure of where the auto bailout might have helped auto workers, their families, their neighbors, and so on. If Obama did better in those places, relative to 2008, than in counties without plants, then we have clearer, though not conclusive, evidence that the auto bailout helped him.
Political scientist Dan Hopkins did exactly this analysis, both for the midwestern states often associated with the Rust Belt—Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and West Virginia—and for much of the nation as a whole. Moreover, Hopkins accounted for other factors that might distinguish counties with auto plants from those without. For example, counties with auto plants—like Wayne County, Michigan, where Detroit is located—often have large populations of black voters who might support Obama for other reasons. Once other factors had been incorporated into the analysis, Obama did not do significantly better in counties with auto plants than in those without. There was no evidence that the auto bailout earned Obama additional votes in precisely the places where its effect should have been largest.39

This does not mean the bailout was irrelevant, however. Perhaps its effects on the election had less to do with the economics of the Rust Belt and more to do with the overall economy. Had there been no bailout, the resulting loss of jobs and personal income may have weakened the economy even further, thereby endangering Obama’s reelection bid. But if so, this would have been more evidence for the importance of the national economy, not the “what have you done for me lately?” theory.

Women, and the “war” on them. The election year presented the Republican Party with a series of incidents that, to many observers, damaged its standing among women. In January, a controversy arose about whether the Obama administration would require religious institutions to provide contraception to employees—leading to a White House compromise on February 10. In the wake of this, the House Committee on Oversight and Government held a hearing on contraception and was attacked for inviting no women to testify. At about this time, presidential candidate Rick Santorum spoke out against birth control, saying it is “a license to do things in the sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be.” A prominent supporter of Santorum’s campaign, Foster Friess, then suggested that women could hold an aspirin “between their knees” as a form of birth control. Two weeks later, House Democrats organized their own hearing on contraception and invited Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University law student who was not allowed to appear at the earlier hearing and advocated for including contraception coverage in the university’s health care plan. In response, talk radio host Rush Limbaugh called Fluke a “slut” and a “prostitute” who “wants to be paid to have sex.” Obama then called Fluke to express his support. Meanwhile, House Democrats began fund-raising around the slogan “The War on Women.”40

Once the general election campaign was under way, Obama ran commercials attacking Romney on these issues. In one ad, a woman said that it was “scary time to be a woman” and that Romney was “so out of touch.” The ad said that Romney opposed requiring insurance companies to cover contraception and supported a bill that would outlaw abortion even in cases of rape or incest.41 On August 19, this very topic came up again after Republican Senate candidate Todd Akin of Missouri was asked about abortion in cases of rape. He said, “First of all, from what I understand from doctors, that’s really rare. If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down,” before going on to suggest that it was the rapist, not the child, that should be punished. This resulted in a firestorm of protest, and Akin’s poll numbers dropped by several points. (He went on to lose to incumbent Claire McCaskill.) Then, in the second presidential debate on October 16, Romney responded to a question about fair pay for women by asserting that, as Massachusetts governor, he had actively tried to find women to serve in his cabinet: “I went to a number of women’s groups and said, ‘Can you help us find folks, and they brought us whole binders full of women.’” The “binders” comment was also mocked and went on to become an Internet meme. Finally, on October 23, Republican Senate candidate Richard Mourdock of Indiana said in a debate that “even if life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that is something God intended to happen.” No wonder, then, that the Obama campaign believed the issues of abortion and contraception benefited them. Press Secretary Jen Psaki said, “The more we’re talking about women’s issues, women’s healthcare, the differences between the candidates, the better it is for us.”42

Before we examine the “War on Women” and its impact in 2012, one piece of context is important to understand. The well-known gender gap in partisanship and voting behavior—whereby women are more likely than men to identify as Democrats and vote for Democratic candidates—did not emerge because of changes in women’s behavior. The gender gap has grown because men have changed their political views, becoming more Republican over the last several decades.43 In 1952, 59% of women identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party. In 2008, almost the same fraction, 55%, did so. By contrast, Democratic Party identification dropped 13 points among men during this period (from 60% to 47%).44 Thus we should not unwarrantedly fall prey to what writer Katha Pollitt calls the “Smurfitte Principle”—“boys are the norm, girls are the variation”—and assume that any differences between women and men derive only from the interests or values of women, or from how women respond to information during a campaign. In this case, men are the variation.45

A first piece of evidence involves how men and women differed in their attention to controversies about contraception and abortion. When we asked about two specific contraception controversies during the campaign, women were less likely than men to know about these controversies. In a March 3–6 poll, respondents were asked to pick which of three statements was Santorum's
position on birth control, one of which was the statement quoted earlier. Only 36% of men and 26% of women picked the correct statement; most said they did not know. We also asked who had called "a female Georgetown University law student" after Limbaugh attacked her. About 57% of men, but only 44% of women, said that it was Obama. This does not suggest that women were particularly attentive to news about contraception.

To understand how women did or did not respond to all of the controversies in 2012 about contraception and abortion, we begin by charting news media attention to these controversies. Figure 7.6 presents the number of mentions of the prominent figures in this debate—Pluke, Akin, and Mourdock—as well as general mentions of issues like contraception and abortion. The figure shows how the debate about health care reform's contraception mandate initially created attention to these topics, culminating in the February compromise. Afterward the controversies surrounding Pluke and Limbaugh, Akin, and Mourdock generated additional spikes in news coverage.

Did any of this coverage affect attitudes about the presidential race? We matched respondents in YouGov surveys to the volume of coverage that aired around the time they were interviewed. The question is whether attitudes about Obama and Romney were different when this coverage spilled and, if so, whether women's attitudes shifted—in particular, whether they shifted in ways that favored Obama. We subdivided women into two groups—those under forty-five and those forty-five and older—to capture any differences based on the likelihood of future childbirth.

We could find no consistent relationship between the volume of coverage about contraception and abortion and a host of attitudes: vote intentions, overall views of the candidates, approval of Obama's job performance, approval of Obama's performance on abortion, or enthusiasm for voting in November. This was true both for older and younger women. (The appendix to this chapter has further details.)

For the general election period, June–November, we also compared the vote intentions of people living in battleground states to those living in other states. Perhaps women living in battleground states—who were more likely to have seen ads about contraception and abortion or be contacted by the campaigns about these issues—were distinctive. We found little evidence of this as well. We also looked month by month, in case the differences between non-battleground and battleground states increased with time as the campaign became more vigorous. Only in July did women in battleground states appear slightly more distinct: relative to women in non-battleground states, they were about 2 points more favorable toward Obama if we imagine vote intentions as a 100-point scale. Interestingly, July was when the Obama campaign began its advertising on abortion. But there were no differences between women in battleground and non-battleground states in later weeks, perhaps because abortion was rarely mentioned in Democratic ads after the summer. Given the short-lived effect of ads generally, any effects of these July ads likely did not persist for months on end.

Here is one last test of whether the issue of abortion in particular boosted Obama's support among women. We know from the December 2011 interview whether people were initially Obama supporters, Romney supporters, supporters of some other candidate, or undecided. We can then see how their attitudes toward abortion, along with other factors, affected whom voters in each of these four groups ended up supporting when interviewed after the election in November 2012. That is, we can see how attitudes toward abortion affected any shifts in vote decisions, as it might have if the "War on Women" changed people's minds. We can address various questions. Did support for abortion help ensure that Obama's initial supporters, especially his female supporters, stuck by him in the end? Did support for abortion end up driving Romney's initial supporters, especially his female supporters, to Obama? Were attitudes toward abortion consequential in how undecided voters...
broke? Most important, we seek to estimate the overall effects of all of these processes: how much did abortion attitudes contribute to Obama’s vote share in November?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the issue’s longstanding salience in American politics, abortion attitudes were related to the voting decisions of both men and women. Among men, the most important consequence of a pro-choice attitude was to reinforce the loyalties of initial Obama supporters. The most pro-choice man who supported Obama in December 2011 was 9 points more likely to support him in November, compared to the most pro-life man. But among women, the most important consequence of a pro-choice attitude was to build support for Obama among those who did not initially support him. Compared to the most pro-life woman, the most pro-choice woman was only 2 points more likely to support Obama on Election Day if she initially supported Obama, but 9 points more likely if she initially supported Romney, 31 points if she initially supported another candidate, and 30 points if she initially was undecided. The apparent impact of abortion attitudes exists over and above other influences that may have induced changes in voting behavior over these months—such as party identification or attitudes about government regulation of the economy. Clearly, then, abortion attitudes helped account for how both men and women voted—and how they ended up at their final choices. (The appendix to this chapter has further detail.)

But did the impact of abortion attitudes affect the candidates’ overall vote share? That is a very different question. Just because pro-choice and pro-life voters tended to make different decisions on Election Day does not mean that the issue of abortion gave either candidate a net advantage. If, for example, undecided female voters were evenly split between pro-choice and pro-life attitudes, then any influence of abortion attitudes on their ultimate decision would send equal numbers of female voters into the Romney and Obama camps. We therefore estimated the contribution of abortion attitudes to the total vote share of each candidate. This calculation is specific to the particular measures, model, and sample in our analysis, so we must be cautious in any generalizations.

With that caveat stated, here is the striking finding: abortion attitudes appeared to contribute more to Obama’s vote share among men, not among women. Among men, the contribution of abortion attitudes was about 1 point of vote share. This was mainly due to the fact that abortion attitudes helped ensure that men who were initially Obama supporters remained Obama supporters. Because most of this group leaned to the pro-choice side, the combination of that leaning and the impact of abortion attitudes produced a net advantage for Obama from this issue.

But among women, abortion attitudes contributed very little to Obama’s overall vote share. Among women who initially supported Romney or another candidate, abortion attitudes benefited Romney more than Obama—mainly because these women leaned to the pro-life side. Among women who initially supported Obama or were undecided, abortion attitudes ended up benefiting Obama. Altogether, neither candidate gained much of an advantage from this issue. It ultimately netted Obama less than a tenth of a point of vote share. To see why Obama did not benefit all that much, consider women who were originally undecided in December 2011. Their attitudes toward abortion were not tilted much to either side: 27% called themselves pro-life, 28% called themselves pro-choice. 29% said they were both, and the rest said neither or were unsure—to draw on one of the questions we used to measure attitudes toward abortion. The salience of abortion helped Obama a little bit among this group, but ultimately it produced new supporters for both Obama and Romney, not Obama alone.

Ultimately, despite the Obama campaign’s claim that women’s health was an advantageous issue for them, news coverage of the controversies about contraception and abortion did not appear to change women’s vote intentions or views of the candidates. And although attitudes about abortion were related to how vote decisions evolved over the course of the campaign, this did not produce much advantage for either candidate—at least in the particular data we have analyzed. None of this means that the controversies surrounding Sandra Fluke, Todd Akin, and Richard Mourdock—and, by extension, Mitt Romney—were things that the Republican Party can afford to repeat. These controversies may have cost the Republicans two Senate seats, after all. But the impact of the “War on Women” in the presidential election appears to have been muted at best.

Latinos. On Election Day, the strength of Latino and Asian voters’ support for Obama surprised many observers. Although Obama’s winning margin was over 5 points lower in 2012 than in 2008, it was 4 points greater among Latinos and 11 points greater among Asians according to the exit poll. This led to a variety of theories as to why. One was that Romney took a position on immigration during the Republican primary that was too conservative. The National Journal’s Ronald Brownstein made this argument:

Of all Romney’s primary-season decisions, the most damaging was his choice to repel the challenges from Perry and Gingrich by attacking them from the right—and using immigration as his cudgel. That process led Romney to embrace a succession of edgy, conservative positions anathema to many Hispanics, including denouncing Texas for providing in-state tuition to the children of illegal immigrants; praising Arizona’s immigration-enforcement law; and, above all,
promising to make life so difficult for the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants that they would "self-deport.""

The Wall Street Journal’s editorial board said that Romney’s "single worst decision may have been to challenge Texas Governor Rick Perry in the primaries by running his right on immigration." Quite quickly, this theory became accepted as fact. One New York Times piece began: "After a presidential election in which Latino voters rewarded President Obama while punishing Republicans for their positions on immigration, Republican leaders and prominent conservatives moved quickly this week to shift to new ground, saying they could support some kind of legislation to fix illegal immigration." As that piece made clear, even Republicans believed, without any definitive evidence, that their stance on immigration was hurting the party. Some in the Romney campaign also believed as much.

Another theory about Latinos focused on Obama and his "gifts." According to this theory, Obama’s health care plan and especially his June 15 executive action to allow the children of illegal immigrants to remain in the United States without fear of deportation boosted his support among Latinos. Latinos were, to be sure, very supportive of Obama’s action. The vast majority of them supported giving undocumented children and youth permanent resident status as well as a path to citizenship. But that alone was no guarantee that this issue or immigration generally drove Latinos’ votes on Election Day.

To assess the behavior of Latinos in this election, it is important to go beyond the exit poll. Exit polls are very useful instruments, but they are not designed to produce reliable samples of subgroups within the electorate. This fact has bedeviled exit poll samples of Latinos in particular. In 2004, George W. Bush won a vaunted 44% of the Latino vote in the major national exit poll. But this figure was strangely out of line with nearly every pre-election poll—in which Kerry led Bush among Latinos by a much larger margin than in the exit poll, as he did among almost every Latino subgroup, including likely voters, college graduates, and other groups that would be more predisposed to turn out. The same thing may have happened in 2010. In 2012, there was no such discrepancy—the exit poll was in line with pre-election polls of Latinos, such those by the firm Latino Decisions, which had Obama winning 73%–24% in its last pre-election poll. This gave more credence to the exit poll results in 2012, but the general point still holds: we should be cautious about taking exit poll estimates at face value. Moreover, even if the exit poll was accurate, the mere fact that Latinos supported Obama at a slightly higher rate in 2012 than 2008 tells us nothing about why they did so. We need to probe more deeply.

If Obama’s "gifts" mattered, we would expect that Latinos’ perceptions of the candidates or their vote intentions shifted in the wake of Obama’s executive action on June 15. Figure 7.7 shows Obama’s approval rating during 2012 among whites, blacks, and Latinos, drawing on weekly Gallup surveys. There was no bump in approval among Latinos in the immediate aftermath of Obama’s announcement. Indeed, a few weeks after the announcement, his approval among Latinos was actually several points lower than before it—although there is no reason to attribute this dip to the announcement. More important in rallying the support of Latinos was the Democratic National Convention. This is not surprising: most Latinos identify as Democrats, and we have already shown that the convention improved Obama’s standing among Democrats.

It may be, though, that Obama’s action on immigration improved how Latinos evaluated his handling of immigration specifically. In a fortunate
bit of timing, a Latino Decisions/America’s Voice poll was in the field in five battleground states from June 12 to 21, bracketing the June 15 executive action. Although respondents were not randomly assigned to be interviewed before and after the action, and thus we must be cautious in interpreting any changes after Obama’s action, the data reveal an interesting pattern. Among respondents interviewed before the June 15 decision, 45% approved of Obama’s handling of immigration. Among those interviewed after the decision, 61% approved of him. There was similar movement after June 15 in Latino respondents’ vote intentions and enthusiasm: Obama’s support increased 10 points in a head-to-head matchup with Romney, and the percentage who said they were “very enthusiastic” about voting increased by 7 points.

But the apparent impact of Obama’s action was only temporary. In Latino Decisions national tracking polls, Obama’s vote share did notch upward in July—from a 46%–43% lead to a 70%–22% lead. But his lead faded by August. In an August 24–30 poll, Obama’s lead was 64%–30%. After that, Obama began to gain ground as the Democratic convention got underway.

Was this later rally to Obama among Latinos tied to immigration? It seems unlikely on its face. Immigration was not a very prominent issue in campaign advertising; according to the Campaign Media Analysis Group, less than 1% of either Democratic or Republican ad airings mentioned immigration. Moreover, immigration was not the highest priority among Latinos. The economy was a higher priority regardless of whether Latinos were asked their priorities in an open-ended fashion or whether they chose from a set list of policies. This is not to say that it was unimportant—it was the second most cited issue when Latino Decisions asked the open-ended question—but it may not have been paramount.

A more direct test of how much Obama’s “gifts” propelled Latinos toward Obama involves two steps. First, we assess the impact of attitudes toward both immigration and health care reform in December 2011, before much of the fall campaign but after the passage of health care reform as well as Romney’s statements about immigration in the early primary debates. Second, as in the previous analysis of abortion attitudes and the vote decisions of men and women, we assess how immigration and health care attitudes may have affected whether and how Latinos changed their votes between December and November 2012—and ultimately how much each issue contributed to Obama’s vote share. We compare Latinos to non-Hispanic whites (Anglos) to get a sense of whether any patterns among Latinos were distinctive. We measured attitudes toward immigration with a scale combining answers to three questions: whether illegal immigrants make a contribution to American society or are a drain, whether there should be a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants, and whether it should be easier or harder for foreigners to immigrate to the United States. We measured health care attitudes with items asking whether respondents agreed that it was “the responsibility of the federal government to see to it that everyone had health care coverage” and whether they wanted the health care reform law to be expanded, repealed, or kept the same. (Further details are in the appendix to this chapter.)

In December 2011, attitudes toward both immigration and health care reform were associated with vote intentions, and among both Latinos and Anglos. However, the net impact of those issues differed across the two groups. Among Latinos, who tended to have pro-immigration and pro-Obamacare attitudes, the impact of these issues advantaged Obama—netting him over a point of vote share. Among whites these issues, especially health care reform, netted Romney about 3 points of vote share. This is even after we accounted for the influence of other powerful factors affecting vote intentions, such as party identification and attitudes toward other economic and social issues. Thus both issues appeared to be important, and, among Latinos, favored Obama—as the “gifts” hypothesis might suggest.

But this hypothesis falls short in another respect. There is little evidence that attitudes toward immigration or health care reform helped Obama gain much vote share during the campaign itself. When we examined how vote decisions changed from December 2011 to November 2012, immigration attitudes were important among Latinos—and more so than among Anglos—but they contributed only about an additional half a point of vote share to Obama within this group. With health care attitudes, the opposite happened. The total impact of this issue on changes in vote decisions was in Romney’s favor, not Obama’s—netting Romney about 3 points of vote share among Latinos. This is because health care attitudes mattered most among Latinos who initially supported Romney or another candidate. These Latinos tended to oppose health care reform, and thus the overall impact of the issue was to keep them in or move them to Romney’s camp.

The “gifts” theory focused on how Latino support for immigration or health care reform advantaged Obama—and both issues did to some extent, as was apparent at the end of 2011. These issues appeared to help voters make an initial vote choice but did little to gain Obama votes over the course of the campaign—and may even have cost him votes. Had health care reform mattered less, some of these Latinos might have moved toward Obama. We emphasize “might have” because our analysis cannot definitively establish any such hypothetical. But it is worth considering whether if most Latinos who supported health care reform lined up behind Obama early, the remaining Latinos may have been pushed toward Romney in part because of their own concerns about health care reform.
To be sure, our analysis—any analysis—is limited. To pick one limitation, our measures of attitudes toward immigration could have been more extensive. They tapped relevant debates about this issue but not every debate, such as the one over the DREAM Act. Another caveat is that our analysis cannot speak to alternative scenarios or counterfactuals, including the most important: what if Romney had adopted more moderate positions on immigration rather than attacking Perry from the right? It is an open question. Romney certainly seemed to regret his stance, saying after the election that “we weren’t effective in taking my message primarily to minority voters—to Hispanic-Americans, to African-Americans, other minorities. That was a real weakness.”

We are skeptical, however, that Romney himself was the central problem. Part of the challenge that Romney faced among Latinos was the Republican Party’s challenge—just as Romney’s “empathy gap” has been endemic to his party, as we noted in chapter 5. The GOP was not in high standing among Latinos well before Romney was the nominee. For example, in a Latino Decisions poll conducted in May 2012, 48% said that the Democratic Party was doing a “good job reaching out to Latinos,” but only 12% said that of the Republican Party. To be sure, a substantial minority was not happy with the Democrats—32% said that Democrats “don’t care too much” about Latinos—but clearly the Republicans fared worse. It is not clear Romney could have undone that single-handedly. For Romney to do much better with Latinos, the Republican Party probably needed to be doing much better before the presidential race began. For that reason, nothing about our analysis should be construed as arguing that Republicans can safely ignore a fast-growing demographic like Latinos. If Republicans want to make enduring gains among Latinos, they will need a more sustained initiative within the party and not simply a presidential nominee who says all the right things.

There is also a larger lesson to be drawn from the behavior of demographic groups in 2012, such as the many we present in Figure 7.5. Much as partisans behaved in predictable ways in 2012, so did the constituent elements of each party’s coalition. That is, much as the campaign rallied partisans, it also reconstituted the party coalitions. During elections we often read stories about whether a candidate is “losing” a group of voters who supported him in a previous election. In 2012, there were stories about whether Obama was losing young people and Jews, to name two examples. But in reality, there are no big swings from election to election among most groups. And what swings do exist depend on a great deal on factors common to almost all groups, such as the fundamental conditions in the country. This is not to say that any one group’s particular interests or opinions are by definition irrelevant. There is more variation in election-to-election swings among smaller subgroups—for example, older low-income whites living in the South. But these variations should not obscure the general pattern. And to the extent that swings among demographic groups are similar, it beg the final question: despite the increasing ability of campaigns to “micro-target” voters using detailed demographic and political data, what if voters respond more to broad, untargeted messages and information? The ability of campaigns to micro-target has not been matched by evidence that microtargeted appeals are more effective.

Was Romney Too Conservative?

“If I hear anybody say it was because Romney wasn’t conservative enough I’m going to go nuts,” So said Republican senator Lindsay Graham the day before the election. He was talking about a potential Romney thought about why the party’s ideology and positions on issues. After the election, moderates and conservatives each insisted that Romney’s loss vindicated their personal beliefs. To moderates, Romney’s conservatism was the problem. To conservatives, he was a “mambling moderate.” But there was one thing that no one seemed to notice: compared to Obama, Romney was ideologically closer to more voters all along.

In December 2012, the 45,000 YouGov respondents were shown a five-category ideological scale—ranging from “very liberal” to “very conservative”—and asked to place themselves, Romney, and Obama on that scale. If we imagine that the scale runs from 0 to 100, where 100 means very conservative, then the average respondent was almost at the midpoint—labeled “moderate”—with a score of 55 (although 13% were not sure and did not place themselves). On average, respondents placed Obama at 26 but Romney at 61. That is, Romney was perceived to be only 7 points away from the average respondent, but Obama was perceived to be 29 points away.

However, more respondents (26%) were not sure about where to place Romney than were unsure about where to place Obama (16%). This makes sense: Obama was a more familiar figure than Romney at that point. Did the campaign help give voters more information about the candidates, allowing some to form perceptions of the candidates’ ideologies and perhaps shifting the perceptions of those who already had some idea? Both things occurred. The percentage who were unsure where to place the candidates declined over the course of the campaign. By the weekend before Election Day, 17% could not place Romney and 9% could not place Obama.

Perceptions also changed, as we show in Figure 7.8. The average respondent did not waver much, remaining slightly right of center. Perceptions of Obama and Romney grew more polarized. In the first survey in which these
questions were included—in mid-January 2012—respondents placed Obama at an average of 29 on the hypothetical 100-point scale. By the end of the campaign, perceptions of Obama shifted 5 points in the liberal direction. For Romney, the trend was in the opposite direction and a bit more pronounced: average perceptions shifted from approximately 65 in January to 61 in March but then increased by 11 points to 72 at the end of the election.27 But even this shift in perceptions of Romney still left him significantly closer to more voters than Obama was. The weekend before the election, 52% of voters placed themselves closer to Romney than Obama, while 38% placed themselves closer to Obama. The rest saw themselves as equally close to both. Romney also had this advantage, as he did throughout the campaign, among potential groups of swing voters, such as true independents or voters who as of December 2011 did not prefer either Obama or Romney.

We can quantify more precisely what Obama’s greater distance from the average voter might have cost him. We focus here on truly independent voters, who, because they are not influenced by partisanship, appear able to vote in relatively unbiased ways based on where they perceive the candidates to stand ideologically.28 For the sake of a simple illustration, imagine that these voters made their decisions in November based only on how far they stood from where they believed each of the two candidates to be. Thinking about voting this way means assuming that voters choose candidates based on where they think those candidates stand rather than choosing a candidate and then “relocating” the candidates ideologically to rationalize that choice—such as by imagining that their preferred candidate is now ideologically closer to them. Even for independents without strong partisan biases, this assumption may not hold.

But if we proceed with this illustration, it suggests that Obama’s greater distance from the average independent could have cost him vote share. The further independent voters were from either Romney or Obama, the less likely they were to support him.29 Had each independent perceived Obama to be at the same ideological position that he or she perceived Romney to be, Obama would have gained nearly 17 points. Again, this is assuming that only ideological perceptions drove voting, so 17 points is higher than it would have been in reality. And other factors may have mattered more for voting than ideology, making Obama’s ideological disadvantage less of a liability. The point of this exercise is simply to show that Obama’s greater distance from the average independent voter was plausibly consequential.

Of course, we could attach even more caveats to this analysis. For example, these omnibus measures of ideology did not capture specific issues, like Medicare or immigration. But the basic finding deserves consideration. In the weeks and months after the election, almost all of the conversation about ideology and issues centered on whether Romney was too extreme. Wrote Slate’s Jacob Weisberg, “Romney is not a right-wing extremist. To win the nomination, though, he had to feign being one.”30 Whether Obama was too extreme rarely, if ever, came up. But Obama appeared to be the candidate more ideologically out of step with American voters in 2012.

Obama’s Race

“Making the Election about Race.” That was the title of an August column in the New York Times by Thomas Edsall. It was occasioned by two Romney campaign advertisements. The first attacked Obama for allegedly “gutting” the requirement that people who received welfare benefits seek work. The second said that the Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”) would cut over $700 million from Medicare to create a “massive new government program that’s not for you.” In both ads, Edsall saw “a racially freighted resource competition pitting middle class white voters against the minority poor.”31
The influence of race has been a chronic feature of Obama's campaigns for president and indeed his presidency. Even as Obama's presence on the Democratic ticket did seem reduce the level of racial prejudice among Americans during the 2008 campaign, it increased again after the campaign was over and he took office. Moreover, Obama's candidacy in 2008 and his subsequent presidency made racial attitudes far stronger predictors of political attitudes. People's attitudes toward blacks have been related to many things associated with Obama, including not only their vote in the 2008 election but also their attitudes toward policies he has promoted, such as health care reform—even their attitudes toward his dog. As we described in chapter 2, the net impact of racial attitudes seems to hurt Obama: that is, he loses more because of sentiments less favorable to blacks than he gains from sentiments more favorable to blacks. The question is whether this was true in the 2012 election as well.

Using the measure of racial attitudes that we introduced in chapter 2—"racial resentment"—we compared how racial attitudes were associated with the vote in both 2012 and 2008. In 2008, YouGov administered a similar election survey that included this same measure of racial resentment. Across the two surveys, there was very little change in the level of racial resentment. If we imagine racial resentment as a 100-point scale, the mean as of December 2011 was only 2 points lower than in 2008.6 (These items were asked in the first interview with respondents.)

The effect of racial attitudes on vote decisions in the 2012 election resembled the predictable pattern others have uncovered: among whites, those with more positive attitudes toward blacks were more likely to vote for Obama than were people with more negative attitudes. This finding comes from a model of vote decisions in both years that also accounted for several other political and demographic factors, which we describe further in the appendix to this chapter. The apparent effect of racial resentment among whites was slightly smaller in 2012 than in 2008 but still quite potent. In 2008, a white person who expressed the least positive attitudes toward blacks according to this measure was 38 points less likely to vote for Obama than was a white person who expressed the most positive attitudes. In 2012, the comparable effect was 30 points. Above and beyond factors like party identification and ideology, racial attitudes were strongly related to attitudes toward Obama in both elections.

Did racial resentment in 2012 affect not only how people voted in November but also whether and how their vote decisions evolved over the course of the campaign? As in previous analyses, we estimated how much racial resentment was associated with any shifts in the decisions of white voters between December 2011 and November 2012. After accounting for other political and demographic factors, we found that whites with less favorable views of blacks were more likely to shift away from Obama if they initially supported him in December 2011, to remain supportive of Romney if they initially supported Romney, and to end up supporting Romney if they supported another candidate or were undecided in December 2011—that is, were "potentially persuadable voters." The apparent impact of racial resentment on transitions was much larger among these persuadable voters, all else equal. And because persuadable voters' views of blacks were more unfavorable than favorable, on average, racial resentment may have cost Obama as much as 6 points among these voters.

Was the impact of racial resentment during the 2012 campaign, particularly among persuadable voters, a consequence of advertising or news coverage of issues related to race, like Romney's welfare ad? We lack a systematic test of this proposition, but several pieces of evidence make us skeptical. For one, when voters were interviewed after the election, the association between racial resentment and their reported votes was not any greater in battleground states than non-battleground states—as one might expect if advertising and other electioneering had made race more salient. For another, the association between racial resentment and any changes in vote decisions over the campaign was also no greater in battleground states and non-battleground states.

Why were differences between battleground states and other states so muted? One possible explanation is that the campaign's discourse did not have the racial undertones that some commentators perceived in Romney's attacks regarding welfare and Medicare. Or perhaps any racial undertones did not affect voters in profound ways. This seemed true with regard to voters' reactions to the welfare ad, for example. In an August YouGov poll, respondents were randomly assigned to watch this ad or not to watch it via a video embedded in the online survey instrument. They were then asked a series of questions about whether Romney and Obama's policies would help or hurt the poor, the middle class, the wealthy, African Americans, and white Americans. Among those who saw the ad, racial resentment became more strongly related to beliefs about whether Romney's policies would be good for the poor, the middle class, and blacks. But there was no such effect on views of Obama's policies, which likely were already strongly tied to racial attitudes. Ultimately, racial messages in the 2012 campaign may not have been sustained or potent enough to make attitudes toward Obama much more racialized than they already were. The impact of race may have been more a chronic feature of how some people think about a black president and not something magnified by battleground state campaigning.

Could racial attitudes have cost Obama at the ballot box in 2012? To answer this question, we first simulated Obama's vote share given racial attitudes as they were and then after shifting all voters' racial attitudes toward a
hypothesized neutral position (the midpoint of the racial resentment scale). That is, we “replaced” both favorable and unfavorable attitudes with neutral attitudes. When we performed such a simulation in chapter 2, we found that Obama’s approval rating increased by almost 4 points—suggesting that unfavorable attitudes toward blacks were, on the whole, depressing support for Obama. That finding paralleled some published analyses of voting behavior in the 2008 election. In the 2012 election, this same simulation produced almost exactly the same effect: a 4-point increase in Obama’s vote share. We also simulated the effects of eliminating only unfavorable attitudes toward blacks and replacing them with neutral attitudes. This produced a slightly larger 5-point increase in Obama’s vote share. 66

As we noted in chapter 2 and will emphasize here, such simulations are inherently limited. They are based on simple statistical models and involve fairly unrealistic hypotheticals. One cannot infer, for example, that had a white Democratic candidate run against Romney, that candidate would have outperformed Obama by 4 or 5 points—thereby winning in a veritable landslide. Other factors may have limited that white Democrat’s appeal. In 2008, for example, some simulations suggest that Hillary Clinton would not have done substantially better than did Barack Obama had she been the nominee. 67 Similarly, in a world in which racial attitudes were less strongly associated with attitudes toward Obama, other factors might have come to the fore and held Obama to roughly the same vote share that he earned in 2012. The upshot of these simulations is that only racial attitudes are prevalent and salient enough to plausibly (though not conclusively) depress support for Obama.

The Obama presidency has always presented the possibility of a “post-racial America”—one in which negative feelings toward or stereotypes about African Americans play a smaller role in our politics. In reality, the opposite has happened: Obama’s 2008 campaign and first term as president heightened the role of racial attitudes—in presidential approval, in attitudes toward certain public policies, and at the ballot box. The substantial impact of racial attitudes in the 2012 election, while not as large as in 2008, only confirmed the ongoing salience of race.

The Stained Glass Ceiling

In a survey conducted during the 2008 Republican presidential primary, the political scientists David Campbell, John Green, and Quin Monson did an experiment. They gave people information about Mitt Romney and then asked them if this information made them more or less likely to support Romney. Everybody was told that Romney was a businessman, the former governor of Massachusetts, and the head of the 2002 Winter Olympics. They also heard that he had been married for thirty-nine years and had raised five sons. One random subset of people was then told that he was “a local leader in his church.” A different random subset of people was told that Romney was “a local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon Church.” Being told that Romney was merely a church leader had no effect on people’s willingness to vote for him. But being told that he was a Mormon church leader reduced people’s willingness to vote for him by 30 points. Campbell and colleagues concluded that this helped explain why Romney could not break the “stained glass ceiling” in 2008.68

Fast-forward to 2012, and it seemed as if little had changed. Nearly 20% of Americans said that they would not vote for a Mormon for president—a number exceeded only by the fraction who would not vote for a Muslim or an atheist.69 Larger numbers said that they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who was Mormon.70 Almost a third of Americans said that they did not believe that Mormons were Christians, as did 42% of white evangelicals—an important part of the Republican base. All of this raises the question: did his Mormonism hurt Romney at the polls in November?

There was actually reason to think it would not. About 40% of registered voters did not even know that Romney was Mormon in the first place. And Mormonism, while present in some news coverage, was not a major theme of either campaign.71 At one point in the summer of 2011, the Obama campaign appeared to threaten that they would at least allude to Romney’s religion, as one Obama advisor said that “There’s a weirdness factor with Romney, and it remains to be seen how he wears with the public.”72 This created a hue and cry, and the Obama campaign never said much about Romney’s religion afterward. Meanwhile, Romney himself spent most of the campaign avoiding the subject of the Mormon Church, having been shocked by the anti-Mormonism he encountered on the trail in 2008.73 He worked mainly behind the scenes to earn the support of prominent evangelical leaders like Franklin Graham (and was successful).74 Only toward the end of the campaign, starting around the Republican National Convention, did Romney change his mind, inviting Mormons to offer testimonials at the convention, citing his experience as a missionary and pastor in the second debate, inviting the press to attend church with him, and so on.

On its face, Mormonism did not seem much of a hindrance. For example, Romney’s support among white evangelicals was comparable to that of recent Republican presidential candidates, and the white evangelical percentage of the exit poll sample was also comparable to that of previous years.75 This appeared to confirm early evidence that Romney’s Mormonism was not costing him support among Republicans or white evangelicals in July, roughly equal
numbers supported him no matter whether his Mormonism made them “uncomfortable” or not. Even more interestingly, Campbell, Green, and Monson repeated their experiment from 2008 in 2012. They found that telling people about Romney’s Mormon faith had a much smaller impact than it had in 2008.

But we want to push further to identify the potential effects of attitudes about Mormons in the overall electorate, including not only whether people voted for Romney but whether they voted at all. When YouGov first interviewed respondents in December 2012, they were asked a simple question: How favorably or unfavorably would you rate Mormons on a 0–100 scale? The average among non-Mormon respondents was 55—just slightly on the favorable side—which was more favorable than the average rating of Muslims (47) but less favorable than the average views of Jews (71) or Christians (74). Of course, Mormons consider themselves Christians, although some Americans do not believe this. In this survey, we merely included the terms “Mormons” and “Christians” in a longer list of groups that respondents evaluated—including not only Muslims and Jews but also whites, blacks, Latinos, Asians, and gays and lesbians. We left it to respondents to define those terms as they wished.

On average, views of Mormons were more positive among Republicans (62) than among Democrats (54) or independents (52). Among people who said they were born again—a proxy for identifying evangelicals—views of Mormons were a bit less favorable but only among Republicans. The average for born-again Republicans was 58, compared to 64 among Republicans who were not born again. One challenge in asking about Mormons at this point in time was that people’s answers may have depended on their feelings toward Romney, arguably the most prominent Mormon in the news. This, and not general feelings toward a group perceived as culturally conservative, may explain why Democrats rated Mormons less favorably than Republicans. But the difference that being born again created among Republicans also suggests that people were thinking at least in part about Mormons and not solely along party lines. And one advantage of asking people their views of Mormons before much of the campaign occurred is that it mitigated (although did not eliminate) the possibility that they would later change their views of Mormons based on their feelings toward Romney. If that happened, then the causality would be reversed: rather than Romney being helped or hurt by people’s attitudes toward Mormons, their attitudes toward Mormons would be helped or hurt by their feelings toward Romney.

For the moment, we proceed on the assumption that feelings toward Mormons could have affected people’s feelings toward Romney. To estimate the role that Mormonism might have played, we modeled both whether and how people voted based on what they reported in the post-election interview. The factors in the model were all from the first interview with these people in December 2011, and they included not only attitudes toward Mormons but other factors known to be associated with turnout and voter choice. For example, the model of voter choice also included people’s party identification, their feeling toward African Americans, measures of their views on both social issues and economic issues, and several demographic variables. (See the appendix to this chapter for more details.) Merely including these factors did not ensure that we accurately estimated any impact of attitudes toward Mormons, and there were plausibly important factors we did not include. But this model at least provided a somewhat rigorous test.

When it comes to whether people voted in the first place, attitudes toward Mormons were significantly related to turnout, but to such a small extent that their effects were not very consequential. Other things equal, a person with a fairly favorable view of Mormons—75 on the 0–100 scale—was about 2.4 points more likely to vote than someone with a fairly unfavorable view of 40. (About 25% of the sample had views less favorable than 40; 25% had views more favorable than 75.) What did such differences add up to? Not much. If somehow every voter viewed Mormons as favorably as Christians generally—which would have lifted the average favorability of Mormons by almost 20 points—this model predicted that turnout would have increased by about 1.4 points. Of course, this simulation represents a dramatic and unlikely shift in attitudes. Less dramatic shifts would produce even smaller increases in turnout.

Moreover, most of the people who had relatively unfavorable views of Mormons and stayed home on Election Day would not have voted for Romney anyway. We examined people who were interviewed in the last month of the campaign and then reported that they did not vote when they were interviewed again after the election. Among those who expressed an unfavorable view of Mormons—defined as scores on the 0–100 scale below the average of 55—only 11% reported that they preferred Romney, whereas 59% supported Obama, and 30% were undecided or supported some other candidate. In short, there was not a large group of people who were otherwise predisposed to support Romney but stayed home on Election Day because they disliked Mormons.

Were attitudes toward Mormons associated with the choices of those who did vote? They were, but again this did not put Romney at a significant disadvantage. Holding other factors constant, a person with a relatively favorable view of Mormons was about 1.5 points more likely to support Romney than was someone with a relatively unfavorable view (using the values of 75 and 40 again). To estimate the overall consequences of attitudes toward Mormons, we again simulated the effect of making attitudes toward Mormons as
favorable as attitudes toward Christians generally. This increased Romney's support by 0.8 points—a very modest amount given how transformative such a shift in attitudes toward Mormons would be.49

Even these small effects may be too big. If attitudes toward Mormons were more a consequence than a cause of support for Romney, or there was something that we have left out of the model but was related to both attitudes toward Mormons and voting, we have overstated the possible impact of attitudes toward Mormons in this race. We are not suggesting that Mormons can safely run for office without any fear of religious prejudice hurting their chances. We must study more races involving Mormon candidates before drawing firm conclusions. But in 2012, Romney's religion appeared to be a minimal factor in his loss.49

The Favorability Gap

During and after the election, commentators returned again and again to the question of Romney's personality and biography—and whether these were somehow obstacles he could never overcome. We noted in chapter 5 that at the end of the summer Romney was not only viewed less favorably than Obama but less favorably than other presidential candidates since 1984. This prompted the Washington Post's Ruth Marcus to write: "Is Romney Likable Enough to Win?"50 For some, the election seemed to answer the question. The National Review's Daniel Foster asked, "Could the Romney campaign have done more to make their guy likable when it counted?"51

Other commentators, including even some rueful Republicans, zeroed in on the empathy gap we have described. According to this theory, Romney's problem was that he was not perceived as "caring" enough about ordinary Americans' problems—a notion often connected to his time at Bain Capital and prominent in Democratic attacks on him. We have shown that these attacks appeared not to shift the polls in notable ways. In fact, the empathy gap was essentially no different on the eve of the election than it had been at the beginning of 2012. But the election made it seem crucial. Commentators frequently cited the exit poll in which 21% of voters selected "cares about me" as the most important from a list of important traits that the candidates should have, and those voters broke for Obama 81%–18%. The Weekly Standard's Jay Cost said, "Obama's campaign against Romney, which portrayed him as an out-of-touch plutocrat, appears largely to have been successful."52

Was Romney's loss really about likability or empathy? This is a hard question to answer, and the reason—as we have discussed throughout this chapter—is the classic challenge of separating correlation from causation. Did people form perceptions of Obama and Romney and then decide who to vote for based on those perceptions? Or did they decide who to vote for based on some other criteria—like simple partisan loyalty—and then arrange their perceptions of the candidates to fit their vote intentions?53 The exit poll can shed no light on this question. Our data cannot resolve this issue either, but they can take us further toward an answer.

Romney had one thing going for him as the campaign drew to a close. Even if the empathy gap remained, the favorability gap narrowed and was perhaps even eliminated. In YouGov surveys, views of Obama remained stable as views of Romney became more favorable. This is evident in the first panel of Figure 7.9, which shows the average favorability ratings of each candidate on a 4-point scale ranging from "very unfavorable" to "very favorable." Neither candidate was evaluated particularly favorably, but Romney did narrow what was a persistent gap, largely because of his performance in the first debate. The small edge that Obama had in the last pre-election YouGov poll was mirrored in the other public polls as well.54

We have already described how partisan loyalties appeared to drive trends in perceptions of the candidates. Figure 7.9 illustrates this again. The second panel of the figure breaks down Romney's average favorability rating by whether respondents were Romney supporters, Obama supporters, or undecided or third-party supporters as of their first interview in December 2011. Viewed this way, it is clear where most of the increase in Romney's favorability came from: people who already supported him and just decided that they liked him more. Democrats moved in the opposite direction, although not quite as much. Undecided voters bounced around largely because there were relatively few in each week's survey, creating more random fluctuation. But if we smooth out these fluctuations, there is very little secular trend. The reason for this is evident in the third panel of Figure 7.9, which breaks down these undecided voters by whether they were Republicans, Democrats, or independents. Given the small number of undecided voters, the trends are presented monthly rather than weekly. Once again, the same pattern emerges, one consistent with the growing power of partisanship among undecided voters that we documented earlier: undecided Republicans came to feel better about Romney, while undecided Democrats moved in the opposite direction. Ultimately Romney became more popular largely because Republicans came to like him more.

All of this illustrates the challenge in sorting out correlation from causation. To make some headway, we relied on statistical modeling similar to what we employed to study the relationship between economic evaluations and vote intentions (see the appendix). We examined respondents who were interviewed in October after the first presidential debate and then reported
Because views of the candidates may have been in part a consequence of vote decisions, we drew on these respondents' original ratings of candidate favorability in December 2011 as a proxy for—or, in statistical lingo, an “instrument” for—their ratings of the candidate favorability in October. The idea is that by drawing on ratings very early in the campaign, before vote intentions may have been fully solidified for some voters, we can estimate the effect of favorability on vote choice more accurately, with less threat from reverse causation (vote intentions affecting perceptions of the candidates). Even this kind of statistical model cannot fully eliminate such threats, but it is arguably better than proceeding as if those threats do not exist. Unfortunately, we do not have measures of empathy in the December 2011 interview, so the estimated impact of empathy cannot be modeled in this same way. (Further details are in the appendix to this chapter.) Note that this model did not control for many other things and thus likely overestimated the effects of favorability and empathy. If favorability and empathy were not decisive based on this model, then it is not likely they would be once other relevant factors were taken into account.

As expected, how people felt about the candidates was strongly associated with how they voted. The key question is what any favorability or empathy gap cost Romney overall. One way to think about this is to “adjust” perceptions of him to be more positive and see what consequence might have resulted. This is a hypothetical exercise, but an instructive one. Romney faced two potential disadvantages: despite his gains in favorability, he was not viewed quite as favorably by Republicans as Obama was viewed by Democrats, and he was not viewed as favorably by independents as Obama was. This was even more true in people's assessments of empathy.

If we adjust Romney's favorability to eliminate his disadvantage, what happens? Very little. Obama loses only a tenth of a point of vote share. If we adjust both Romney's favorability and empathy to eliminate his larger empathy disadvantage, what happens? Obama is estimated to lose almost 1 point in this simulation. This would have been enough to tighten the race—theoretically, shrinking Obama's winning margin from nearly 4 percentage points to just about 2 points—but would not have tipped the race clearly in Romney's favor.

And, again, given the simplicity of the model, this is likely an unrealistically large estimate. Accounting for a few other factors that were plausibly associated with vote decisions—for the sake of illustration, we added to the model attitudes toward blacks, a set of economic issues, and a set of social issues—reduced the benefits that Romney received in this hypothetical scenario to 0.8 points, well short of what he needed to eke out even the narrowest of victories.

Over the years, Republican presidential candidates have both won and lost elections while suffering from an empathy gap relative to their Democratic
opponents. Closing this gap was therefore not necessary for Romney in 2012, and it probably would not have been sufficient, as this analysis suggests. This leads to a broader point about presidential candidates: although much about the presidential campaign helps us "get to know" the candidates—their strengths, weaknesses, quirks, and foibles—it is not necessarily the case that the candidates will win or lose the election because of who they are as people. When political scientist Larry Bartels studied how voters perceived the candidates on a variety of trait dimensions in the 1980–2000 presidential elections—honesty, leadership, empathy, and others—he found only one election, 2000, where the elimination of gaps in how voters assessed the opposing candidates could have shifted the outcome. This is not surprising. Perceptions of the candidates seem to be much more the consequence, and not the cause, of how people vote.

Obama’s Formidable Campaign

When an election is over, almost no time passes before the victor’s campaign gets the credit. The day after Obama was first elected in 2008, the front-page New York Times story said, "The story of Mr. Obama’s journey to the pinnacle of American politics is the story of a campaign that was, even in the view of many rivals, almost flawless. And the day after Obama was reelected, Slate’s John Dickerson wrote, "What was ratified on election night was the benefit of a permanent campaign and the talent of the Obama team." The much vaunted Obama ground game appears to have been a real thing... His campaign team was so formidable that it made up for all the inadequacies, vulnerabilities, and mistakes (remember that first debate?) of a weak incumbent president in a sputtering economy. Granted, Obama’s 2012 campaign was no longer "almost flawless," only "formidable," but the logic is the same: winners win because they run great campaigns. The corollary, of course, is that losers never do.

We have argued throughout that general election campaigning can matter. This was evident in how the Democratic National Convention and the debates shaped people’s views of the candidates. This was also evident in how television advertising could leave an imprint—albeit a fleeting one—on vote intentions during the summer and fall. Now our task is to assess the impact of not only the advertising—the "air war" of campaigns—but the "ground game," the field organizations that Dickerson referred to. The field operation of the Obama campaign has been justifiably lauded. It reflected an intensive and innovative effort to target the right subset of voters, the staff necessary to contact voters (often face-to-face), and the tactics and techniques that have been shown—often via rigorous experimentation—to both persuade people to support a candidate and then get them to the polls. The field operation was credited in bringing enough Democrats to the polls so that the electorate looked much like it did in 2008, despite the doubts of many—particularly Romney supporters—who thought that the 2008 electorate was an aberration. The challenge is to figure out how much all this campaigning mattered.

As we noted in chapter 6, the Romney campaign’s disadvantage in television advertising disappeared as the campaign drew to a close, with a particularly large spike in Romney ads right before Election Day. Romney and his allies bought a big chunk of advertising in battleground states as well as some ads that aired nationally. But Romney’s disadvantage in terms of field organization was large and durable. We can quantify his disadvantage simply by considering the number of field offices that each campaign had opened up—data we gleaned from each candidate’s website. Obama had 786 offices; Romney had 284. This meant that not only did Obama tend to have more offices in areas where Romney also had offices, but Obama had many offices in places where Romney did not. There were 187 counties in the United States that had at least one Obama field office but no Romney field office. Figure 7.10 maps each candidate’s field offices and shows Obama’s advantage.

The location of Obama’s and Romney’s field offices also offers a clue as to each campaign’s goals. Obama’s offices were located predominantly in

Figure 7.10.
The location of Obama and Romney field offices.
Data on field office location were gathered from the Obama and Romney websites.
The graph is by Brian Law.
Democratic-leaning counties—suggesting that the goal of these offices was to boost Democratic turnout. A county in which Obama won 75% of the vote in 2008 was nearly 40 percent more likely to have at least one Obama office in 2012 than a county where Obama won only half the vote. Romney’s offices, however, were located in a mix of Republican-leaning counties and swing counties. A county in which McCain won 75% of the vote was only 7 points more likely to have at least one Romney field office than a county where McCain won 50% of the vote. The location of Romney’s offices appeared to reflect the desire to boost Republican turnout and persuade swing voters to support him.\(^{36}\)

Obama seemed to have another advantage in terms of the orientation within each field office. The Atlantic’s Molly Ball traveled to field offices in various swing states and summarized her reaction thusly: “The Obama offices were devoted almost entirely to the President’s reelection; the Republican offices were devoted almost entirely to local candidates, with little presence for Romney.” In large part this was because Romney had outsourced his field operation to the Republican National Committee (RNC), who was charged with mobilizing support for Republican candidates up and down the ballot.\(^{50}\) Ball’s assessment fits with what we saw after visiting several field offices in Cuyahoga, Lake, and Medina counties in Ohio in October. At the Obama office in Parma, Ohio, there were many different kinds of Obama signs and stickers available for people to take home, including bumper stickers with ethnic identifiers that would appeal to the neighborhoods around Parma. At the Romney office not far away in Independence, Ohio, there were traditional Romney signs and stickers alongside yard signs and materials for other Republican candidates running in the state, particularly state treasurer Josh Mandel, who was hoping to oust incumbent Senator Sherrod Brown from office.

Of course, field offices are not the full story about field organization. Certainly the Romney campaign was quick to dismiss their disadvantage in the sheer number of offices. Rick Wiley, the political director of the RNC, told Ball: “The Obama campaign thinks, ‘If we put 100 offices in this state, we’re going to win.’ We take a smarter, bigger, smarter approach, just like we do for government.” Even for the Obama campaign, field offices were just part of the equation. Obama’s field director, Jeremy Bird, explained to Ball how they also did organizing out of “staging locations” that could be nothing more than a volunteer’s living room in a battleground state neighborhood. But the presence of field offices was likely correlated with the reach and vigor of the broader field operation.

Our goal, then, was to estimate the potential impact of both advertising and field offices on Obama’s vote share. In 2008, Obama’s advantage in both advertising and field offices appeared to matter. In one study, political scientists Michael Franz and Travis Ridout found that an advantage for Obama of 1,000 ads over the month before the election translated into an additional six-tenths of a point of vote share.\(^{39}\) In addition, two studies of field offices in 2008 found that they garnered votes for Obama, perhaps enough to swing the outcomes in a three-swing states.\(^{40}\) However, no study has yet to estimate the impact of both advertising and field offices simultaneously.

We did so by analyzing county-level election returns from all 3,156 counties in the continental United States plus Hawaii (including the District of Columbia). Using the county-level election returns has several advantages. Most important, we could study not pre-election surveys—whose respondents may or may not vote—but actual vote share (people who showed up and voted). By analyzing actual vote share, we directly assessed the impact of campaign activity on the election’s outcome.

For each county, we recorded how many Obama or Romney field offices were present: none, one, or two or more. (Few counties had more than two.) We also recorded the balance of advertising in that county on the day prior to Election Day—Monday, November 5, when there was a particularly big advantage for Romney—and the balance of advertising in the five days prior to that. We expected that the balance of advertising on Monday was more potent than the earlier ads, given how quickly advertising effects appeared to dissipate. We also took account of various other county characteristics: how well Obama did in that county in 2008; demographic characteristics such as the percentage of blacks and Latinos living in the county; and the change in unemployment in the year before the election. (More information and the results of the model are in the appendix to this chapter.)

The relationship of ads to vote share resembled what we found previously: a greater ad imbalance improved vote share for the candidate airing more ads, but the effect of ads appeared to decay quickly. Ads on the day before the election appeared to produce small but measurable gains in vote share—although we cannot estimate this effect with much precision. The largest advantage that Obama had in any one county—the equivalent of an additional three ads per capita on that Monday, relative to Romney’s advertising—translated into an additional three-tenths of a point of vote share. The largest advantage that Romney had—the equivalent of nine additional ads per capita—translated into almost an additional point of vote share. By contrast, the effects of the previous five days of ads had a much smaller effect. According to our estimates, it would have taken about eighty additional ads per capita over the course of those five days to generate the same increase in vote share that an advantage of three ads per capita produced the day before the election.

At one point, Obama advisor David Axelrod argued that early advertising was more important than late advertising, suggesting that Romney’s ad blitz was wrongheaded. Axelrod said: “By September, people are disregarding ads.
They back-loaded. We front-loaded." We find that back-loading—airing ads close to the election—was actually more effective than front-loading—airing ads early in the campaign—if the goal was to influence voters on Election Day.

We also found some effect of field offices, but only the Obama field offices. Compared to counties with no Obama field offices, Obama's vote share was about three-tenths of a point higher in counties where Obama had one field office and six-tenths of a point higher in counties where Obama had two or more field offices. Romney's field offices, by contrast, had an effect that was only half this big and could not be estimated with as much statistical confidence. This is consistent with the impression that Obama's field operation was more effective than Romney's. Essentially, our best guess is that Romney would have needed two offices in a county to match the effects of one of Obama's offices, all else equal.

Putting these two sets of results together generates some interesting conclusions about the relative effectiveness of ads and field offices. If the apparent impact of the Obama field offices indicates what effective field organization can produce, then in 2012 placing one field office in a county was worth about as much as an advertising advantage of roughly 3 additional ads per person on the day before the election. Obama had that large of an advertising advantage in eighteen counties on the eve of the election—suggesting that there was considerable value for him in organizing and maintaining a large field operation.

The Romney campaign's strategy of a last-minute ad blitz also makes sense, given this result. Without the organizational strength on the ground, it needed to do more work through the airwaves. Of the 983 counties in the battleground states, Romney had a last-minute 31 or greater advantage in 144 counties.

Ultimately, then, the results suggest two things. First, an advertising advantage on the day before the election likely increased vote share, and much more than did advertising prior to that point. Second, the Obama field offices also appeared to increase vote share. We use the phrase "the results suggest" deliberately. Our results are based on statistical models that may not account for every important factor, although we have included arguably the most important (especially Obama's vote share in 2008). But if the campaigns were targeting their advertising and ground game in part based on factors that we have not accounted for, then our results may overstate the impact of all this campaign activity. On the other hand, we may not have captured all of the impact of the ground game—particularly if the staff at some field offices worked outside of the county in which the field office was located. For example, staff in field offices in some non-battleground states likely worked to contact voters in battleground states. And within a battleground state, there was obviously nothing preventing staff from one field office from crossing county boundaries.

With those caveats stated, it is worth addressing two hypotheses about the race. First, how much additional late advertising would Romney have needed to win? Second, what if Obama had not had an advantage in the field? What do our data and models suggest might have happened? For Romney to win the election, assume that he would have sought only the minimum winning number of Electoral College votes (270) and that he would have targeted states where Obama's winning margin was the smallest. One strategy would then be to win Florida, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Virginia. But to win even this handful of states, Romney would have needed truly massive advantages in advertising. As we have noted, it was not common for Romney to have even a 31 advantage on the day before the election. The most he had anywhere was about 91 advantage. Based on our model, he would have needed to expand his advertising advantage in Florida by an additional 43 margin, in Ohio by an additional 16 margin, in Virginia by an additional 223 margin, and in New Hampshire by an additional 31 margin. He might have been able to advertise a bit less at the end of the race if he had maintained a larger advantage in the week leading up to that last day, but he still would have needed an incredible boost at the very end given that many of the battleground state outcomes were not very close. Even if Romney had mustered the resources to buy that much advertising, there was likely not enough space on the airwaves to rack up margins of that size. A Romney strategist told us that at the end of the campaign, their campaign bought ads in Pennsylvania solely because there was nothing else left to buy in places like Ohio. In short, Romney's problem was not necessarily that he was too late with his advertising—as Axelrod suggested—but that he had too little. Given the practical limits on how much additional advertising could have been aired, it seems doubtful that advertising alone could have vaulted Romney to victory.

What about Obama's advantage in field offices? How decisive was it? If Obama had established only as many field offices as Romney had in all of these counties, we again estimate that the outcome of the election would not have changed very much. Obama would have lost an average of almost a tenth of a point of vote share across the states, and no state outcome would have changed. Obama would have lost about 124,000 total votes in this scenario.

Overall, we estimate that Obama gained roughly an additional 248,000 votes from his field operation. Given where those votes were located, we estimate that Obama would have lost Florida by a very narrow margin in this scenario. This is consistent with estimates from 2008. Political scientists Joshua Darr and Matthew Levendusky have estimated that Obama's 2008 field operation won him about 277,000 votes in total and could have been responsible for his victory in North Carolina. A similar analysis by political scientist Seth Masket found that Obama's 2008 field operation may have been consequential in North Carolina, Florida, and Indiana.
Given the attention Obama's field operation received in both 2008 and 2012, it might seem odd that his field operation—at least as we have measured it here—likely did not decide the election. Certainly our findings call into question headlines like "Obama Won Ohio with Ground Game." Of course, we should be cautious about our findings, especially because counting the number of field offices is a blunt way to measure a field operation. But two points help explain why field organization may not have decided the election. First, many people who vote in presidential elections do so out of habit—that is, they do not need to be contacted by a volunteer. And others may become motivated to vote by the general hullabaloo of the campaign, not by direct outreach from a field office. Second, studies of field organization and mobilization suggest that, at most, effective mobilization will increase turnout by a single-digit number of percentage points—perhaps as much as 8–9 points, and often less—and among those who are contacted. The phrase "among those who are contacted" is important, since obviously campaigns contact only a subset of voters and, indeed, only intend to do so. We do not know how many voters were contacted by either campaign, nor do we know whether their contacts increased turnout by 8–9 points or less. But some provision of back-of-the-envelope math suggests why a field organization may not be decisive. For example, in Ohio, Obama beat Romney by 166,272 votes. Assume, very generously, that the Obama field organization increased turnout by 9 points. In 2012. Such an effect would presume face-to-face contact between an Obama field staffer and each targeted voter, since other forms of contact are less effective. To generate a winning margin of over 166,000 votes assuming a 9-point boost from voter mobilization efforts, the Obama campaign would have had to contact 1.8 million voters in this labor-intensive face-to-face fashion and do so very close to when each Ohioan could have voted, since the effects of contact likely also wear off. That is a massive number to contact in such a short time, equivalent to a third of all voters in Ohio that year. Perhaps this is why in 2008 Obama advisor David Plouffe referred to a field operation as a "field goal unit"—implying that it was valuable but not necessarily the game-winner unless the margin was close. In 2012, the election did not appear close enough for either the ads or field organization to be decisive.

Comparing Electioneering and the Fundamentals

We have made much of the advantages bestowed on an incumbent party candidate when the economy is growing or on the challenger when the economy is contracting. Along the way, we have been careful not to suggest that campaigning is irrelevant. In fact, the tug-of-war metaphor is meant to suggest the opposite. Campaigns affect voters, but both sides tend to neutralize each other. The effects of ads were appreciable but fleeting. Obama and Romney needed consistently to air many more ads than the other to win votes, and neither could do this for long. The effects of field offices were also notable but perhaps not as large as many people believe.

Another way to think about the effects of the campaign is to compare them directly to the impact of the underlying fundamentals. This allows us to investigate a different hypothesis: could campaigning alone have neutralized the advantage that Obama had because of the underlying fundamentals? In other words, could Romney have overcome Obama's structural advantage by campaigning? Addressing this hypothesis requires several assumptions, but here is how the calculation might go.

We can begin with an estimate of the advantage Obama received from the economy, using a model based only on GDP change and incumbency status. In previous presidential elections dating back to 1948, the incumbent party's candidate would be expected to receive an additional 2.4 points of vote share if the economy grew by 1.1% in the first six months of the election year, as it did in 2012. If so, then how much campaigning would Romney have needed to gain 2.4 points at the polls and neutralize Obama's advantage from the economic fundamentals in any given county?

In terms of advertising, Romney would again have needed an enormous advantage—one far greater than he achieved with his final push at the very end of the race. Based on the model we discussed previously—in which we estimate how much advertising affected vote share in each county—ads on the day before the election were most potent. To offset Obama's structural advantage, Romney would have needed to run 27 more ads per capita than Obama. Even if Romney had been out-advertising Obama by 10 ads per capita on each of the five days (Tuesday–Sunday) leading up to that final day (Monday), he still would have needed to air 24 ads per capita more than Obama on this final day.

If Romney had added more field offices, it would have helped but probably not enough. Adding an additional field office in a county would earn him only .15 points (and even that estimate was accompanied by a lot of uncertainty). He would still have needed the same 10 ad per capita advantage in advertising from Tuesday to Sunday before Election Day, plus a 23 ad per capita advantage on the day before Election Day. An additional two field offices still would have required a 10 ad per capita advantage on that Tuesday through Sunday and a 23 ad per capita advantage on that Monday as well.

Thus to neutralize the effects of even a slowly growing economy, Romney would have needed a massive investment in advertising and a field operation probably two to three times the size of the one he had. And we have not even begun to account for other fundamental factors benefiting Obama, such as
incumbency. Incumbents typically get 3 points of vote share just for being the incumbent, over and above any advantage for the economy. For Romney to have made up another 3 points of vote share would have been nearly impossible. This calculation underscores once more what a tough battle Romney faced.

Conclusion

Why did Obama win the 2012 election? Here is what we know or at least suspect. He did not win because of “gifts” to demographic groups, or because voters had prejudices about Mormons, or because Romney was perceived as too conservative. He won in spite of lingering racial prejudice. He won in part because he was perceived more favorably than Romney and in part because he had an effective ground game—but neither of these was likely decisive. As former George W. Bush campaign strategist Matthew Dowd put it: “All of this raises the question of whether campaigns and tactics matter. They do, but only in a very limited way, and they are insignificant compared with the overall political environment and the grand movements of the world and our country.”

In 2012, Obama won in part because the environment favored him. The economy was growing enough for an incumbent to win reelection, and little during the election year pushed the outcome far from what the economy would predict. Indeed, one of the important effects of the campaign was to make a fundamentals-based prediction come true. Although the most visible manifestations of campaign activity, such as television ads and field organizations, were not necessarily deciding factors, the campaign did matter in subtler ways—for example, by rallying partisans and making the economy more salient to undecided voters.

The Wednesday morning after a presidential election is filled with the quarterbacking that usually takes place on a Monday morning during football season. In 2012, pundits and politicians alike were quick to condemn Romney and his campaign for a host of sins—not likable enough, too conservative, not conservative enough, and so on. Some condemnations appeared to reflect misguided expectations. A much-discussed piece by former Republican White House veterans Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner began with this: “By all rights, Barack Obama should have lost the 2012 election. The economy during his first term in office was weak from beginning to end.” But this is a misunderstanding of what the fundamentals suggested, thereby calling into question whether Romney could have won even if the Republican Party had taken all of Gerson and Wehner’s advice. Indeed, what strikes us is how much judgments of any losing candidate are the consequences, not the causes, of losing. Winning candidates do not face such scrutiny. After all, if they had committed such sins, they never would have won, right?

One implication of our analysis, however, is that there was not necessarily any grave mistake that Romney made, one momentous enough to cost him the election. Of course, without the benefit of a time machine and the ability to rerun the campaign different ways, we cannot know for sure. But Romney's personality, biography, platform, and campaign organization—whatever their limitations—did not appear to have been the reason he lost. Although some decisions may have cost him votes, they did not necessarily cost him the race.
CHAPTER 8
Cashing In

A few weeks after the election, conservative activists filled a ballroom to hear newly elected Texas senator Ted Cruz muse on the election. Cruz cited into Mitt Romney, praising him as a "man of character" but saying this about Romney's references to the "47 percent": "I cannot think of an idea more antithetical to the American principles this country was founded on." Out in the room, the mood was bleak. One lobbyist said, "Oh yes, we are all very sad. Some of us have turned to drugs; others are in therapy." Public opinion polls confirmed that a little therapy might be in order: Republicans' assessments of the quality of their lives dropped sharply after the election—to a level not seen since, well, the first time Barack Obama was elected. Republicans were not only unhappy but angry, too. Cruz's remark was indicative of the accusations, recriminations, and self-flagellation within the party. Politics even created an entire category of news called "GOP Civil War."1

This sort of reaction is predictable. Americans with long memories may remember way back in 2004, when John Kerry's loss to George W. Bush occasioned the same sort of intraparty hand-wringing—about whether Democrats could win over the "values voters" that were allegedly responsible for Bush's victory, about whether the Democrats could ever win anything again, period. That the Democrats won decisively in the 2006 and 2008 elections suggests a lesson that many commentators seem not to learn, year after year: just as elections are not actually full of game-changing moments, elections themselves may not be game-changers. Commentators often believe that elections foreshadow a sweeping transformation, and, to be sure, they do have policy consequences. It matters whether Republicans or Democrats control the White House and Congress. But we should not lose sight of the ways in which elections maintain the status quo. They can be "game-samers," too.

Perhaps the two most common mistakes in interpreting an election are assuming that it constitutes a mandate for the winner's policy agenda and assuming that it constitutes a permanent realignment of the electorate. These mistakes are most frequently made by the winning side because winners like to believe that they won because people agreed with them and because they like to believe that their victory means their side will keep on winning. Neither is usually true. As the winning side soon discovers when it goes to cash in its chips, it did not win quite as much as it thought. After the 2012 election, despondent Republicans could take heart in one thing: even if it was not the outcome they wanted, the 2012 election was no sea change in the Democrats' favor either. This puts a very different light on how much the Republican Party must overhaul itself in order to retake the White House. A slowing economy, not a renovation within the party, might be the quickest ticket to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Understanding that presidential campaigns are not full of game-changers and presidential elections are not necessarily game-changers themselves leads to useful lessons for candidates and the news media alike. A more modest perspective on what campaigns can accomplish can inform not only whether candidates run and how they campaign but also how journalists write about the election. A little more "moneyball" can help both in ways that dovetail their overriding goal: for candidates, to win; for journalists, to see beyond the spin and get the story right.

If it seems boring to live through a campaign without that many game-changers, ask yourself: would our elections be better with more game-changers? That is a tricky question to answer, but we are inclined to say no. The predictability and stability that we have documented—underpinned by economic fundamentals and party loyalty—might be preferable.

No Mandate

After his reelection in 2004, George W. Bush famously said, "I earned capital in this election, and I'm going to spend it." Then he embarked on an unsuccessful effort to reform Social Security and saw the increasingly unpopular Iraq War and a worsening economy drag his approval rating down to a low of 22%. After Barack Obama's election in 2008, his supporters were similarly triumphant. New York Times columnist Paul Krugman said, "This year, however, Mr. Obama ran on a platform of guaranteed health care and tax breaks
for the middle class, paid for with higher taxes on the affluent. John McCain denounced his opponent as a socialist and a "redistributor," but America voted for him anyway. That's a real mandate.11

The aftermath of the 2008 election reflected anything but a mandate for Obama's policies. As we described in chapter 2, although Obama and congressional Democrats accomplished much by dint of controlling the House, Senate, and White House, they reaped few political benefits. Commentators who had celebrated the 2008 election as a victory for liberal ideas—the New Republic's John Judis published a piece titled "America the Liberal"—were soon lamenting Obama's missed opportunities, as Judis did in a 2010 article called "The Unnecessary Fall."12

Despite the apparent lessons of Obama's first term, the mood among some Democrats and liberals after his victory in 2012 was no less exuberant than after his victory in 2008. Krugman, writing a month before the election, had not changed his tune: "This election is . . . shaping up as a referendum on our social insurance system, and it looks as if Obama will have a clear mandate for preserving and extending that system."13 And when Obama won, the rhetoric reached new heights. Bob Moser, executive editor of The American Prospect, wrote:

The right will not wither or re lent in response to the message this election has delivered. But progressives can now take heart. The conservative consensus that took hold of America with Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 is over. The idea that government is the enemy no longer prevails. Obama may not have created a new liberal movement—and he may not do so in the next four years. But the emerging liberal majority can.14

A BuzzFeed headline put it even more succinctly: "Welcome to Liberal America."15

Why is this interpretation of the election as wrong in 2012 as in 2008 or 2004? It begins with what a "mandate" means and why it is very rare. The most common meaning of mandate implies a theory about voters: that voters have fixed opinions about a range of political issues, learn the candidates' opinions on those issues, and then vote for the candidate who shares their opinions. Thus the winning candidate should believe that if he implements his policy agenda, the majority of voters will approve.

That would be a reasonable belief if this was how voters made choices. In reality, political science research has shown that voters often do not have fixed opinions about policy and do not know the candidates' opinions either. Of course, candidates do not make it easy for voters to learn, often preferring vague formulations about "helping working families" to specifics about their plans for, say, entitlement reform. When voters do learn, often the causal relationship runs in the direction opposite to what the mandate interpretation implies: voters adjust their opinions about issues to match those of the candidate they have decided to support for other reasons.16

The mandate interpretation is complicated further by another tendency that voters have: to serve as "thermostats" for public policy. Voters move in the opposite direction as the party controlling the White House—to the left under Republican administrations and to the right under Democratic administrations. It is as if when the government does too much, or is "too hot," the public says "cool it." When the government does too little, or is "too cold," the public says "turn up the heat in here." So although the mandate interpretation was that Obama's victory in 2008 suggested an "emerging liberal majority," thermostatic public opinion soon moved against him. This is demonstrated in Figure 8.1, which uses an omnibus measure of the public's support for government programs that is derived from hundreds of different survey questions.17 Under Reagan, for example, the public became more liberal, in contrast to the notion that Reagan's two terms and

![Figure 8.1](image_url)

The ideological mood of the American public. The figure displays the public's overall support for government spending, based on a combination of hundreds of survey questions. Higher values indicate more liberal opinion. The data are from James Stimson.
skills as a communicator succeeded in shifting the public to the right. Under Clinton, there was a sharp shift to the right and then back to the left under George W. Bush.

During the Obama administration, as under Clinton, there was another shift to the right. Far from ushering in a liberal majority, the Obama administration's agenda—which included an economic stimulus, greater regulation of the banking industry, and, most important, health care reform—led the public to prefer less government, not more government. Obama helped increase the conservatism of the American public more than Reagan ever did, ironically enough. It is true that there are countervailing trends to the public's increasing conservatism, such as growing support for same-sex marriage and the legalization of marijuana—two trends that seemed particularly salient on Election Night when voters in Maine and Maryland ratified same-sex marriage and voters in Colorado and Washington ratified marijuana legalization. But those trends are the exception rather than the rule. Thus it is perhaps no surprise that Obama was perceived further to the left of the average voter than Romney was perceived to the right.

Even if there was no mandate coming from voters, Obama could hope that Republicans would still interpret his victory as a mandate. In their book Mandate Politics, political scientists Lawrence Grossback, David Peterson, and James Stimson note another meaning of mandate: a "shared conclusion that derives from public interaction over the interpretation of an election." In their telling, it is less important what voters did or did not want and more important what policymakers believe voters want. After elections perceived to convey a mandate, members of Congress change how they would normally vote, thus shifting policy in the direction the president favors. However, according to Grossback and colleagues, only the 1964 and 1980 presidential elections were truly "mandate" elections, and, even then, the effects of the election on congressional voting were short-lived.

Little about either the 2008 or 2012 election suggested that Republicans believed Obama had a mandate. Republicans quickly coalesced in opposition to Obama's first-term agenda. In the wake of the 2012 election—at least as of this writing—the dynamics did not seem much different. Looming deadlines, including the need to raise the debt ceiling and the expiration of the tax cuts passed under George W. Bush, did create some pressure on Republicans to compromise. The result was a raise in the debt ceiling and the extension of the Bush tax cuts on all individuals making less than $400,000 a year. Some Republicans also embraced immigration reform, believing it central to winning votes among Latinos.

On many other issues, however, Republicans did not appear ready to compromise. The budget sequestration, which Obama had thought Republicans wanted to avoid because of its cuts to defense spending, did not bring Republicans to the bargaining table. In fact, the budget plan drawn up by Paul Ryan and supported by most House Republicans proposed even further cuts to discretionary spending—especially to programs that Obama and Democrats generally support. After the tragic shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, and a strong push by Obama for new gun control measures, Senate Republicans mostly voted against those measures. In short, Republicans remain quite far apart from the Obama administration on big issues. Their posture is not unexpected. The week after the election, Paul Ryan dismissed the possibility that Obama had won a mandate, saying, "I don't think so" and noting that voters "also reelected House Republicans." Thus the 2012 election seemed to produce only more of the slow grind of divided government, without any lubrication from a perceived mandate for Obama.

No Realignment

When one party wins control of the White House—and especially if that party has congressional majorities as well—some commentators cannot resist the presumption that this arrangement must always last. After the 2004 election the writer Michael Lind declared, "Karl Rove is an evil political genius, but he is a political genius. As he hoped, 2004 was a realigning election like 1896... The Democratic Party is not a national party anymore." And then in 2008, Lind had no problem changing his tune about a party that was "not a national party" only four years before: "The election of Barack Obama to the presidency may signal more than the end of an era of Republican presidential dominance and conservative ideology. It may mark the beginning of a Fourth Republic of the United States." The shift of power between the 2004 and 2008 elections—indeed the general seesawing of party power in recent decades—might suggest that elections do not have such grand consequences. But after 2012, similar pronouncements were made, exemplified by New York Times columnist Ross Douthat's calling the election "the Obama realignment." The 2012 election appeared to validate an influential 2002 book by John Judis and Ruy Teixeira called The Emerging Democratic Majority. After the 2008 election, Judis had declared that the election was a "radical realignment" that was "predicated on a change in political geography and ideology." Then after the 2012 election, Judis said "Barack Obama's reelection is evident of a Democratic realignment that dates back almost two decades."

The problem with such conclusions is that they are based on the shopworn notion of "realignment"—a concept that once held sway among some political
scientists but by now has largely been cast aside. The term was always a bit mushy, used in different ways by different scholars. But at its core, the notion of realignment refers to the profound changes wrought by certain distinctive or "critical" elections, occurring occasionally but regularly. "Realigning" elections crystallize a new coalition of voters and, at least in some accounts, bring about unified party control of government and thus major shifts in government policy. The main feature of realignments is their durability. Indeed, the original conception of realignment suggested that after each realigning election, the newly dominant party would hold sway for twenty or thirty years, until societal and political forces threw out the old order and created a new one.35

The reason that realignment has lost its sway among political scientists is simple: it does not describe what has happened. Scholars have looked for evidence that "critical" or realigning elections really ushered in permanent change and found that they did not. Even canonical realigning elections, like the 1896 election that Lind cited, did not have this effect. Political scientist Larry Bartels surveyed 128 years of presidential elections, and though one or two facts corresponded to conventional understandings of realigning elections—the impact of the 1932 election, for example—the overall pattern did not. There were no sharp breaks caused by realignments, followed by periods of relative stability.36

Instead, Bartels found a pattern directly at odds with what realignment suggests—and what commentators suggested about 2012. The realignment idea suggests that winning an election should be associated with continued success. Bartels found the larger the size the winning party's margin of victory in one election, the smaller that party's margin in subsequent elections. Winning did not result in more winning. It began losing. Bartels described this as a tendency toward "equilibration"—that is, a tendency not toward periods of one-party dominance but consistent two-party competition, or what Bartels called "fairly regular alterations between Republican and Democratic possession of the White House." This is analogous to the "dynamic equilibrium" of the general election campaign. Just as two well-funded presidential candidates often compete without one of them achieving a sustained advantage over the months of a campaign, so do the two parties compete without achieving a sustained advantage over multiple elections.

This is exactly what recent elections have illustrated. The presidency has oscillated between Democratic and Republican control. This has often occasioned some scrambling among those certain that a realignment was afoot. After Al Gore lost the 2000 election, Judis and Teixeira wrote that George W. Bush was going to confront a sputtering economy that might "easily be the final catalyst for a new realignment" in favor of the Democrats.38 After Republicans expanded their majority in the House in 2002 and Bush was re-elected in 2004, Teixeira blamed both Gore and John Kerry for their inability to "connect in a genuine fashion" with white working-class voters.39

Moreover, one party's victory in a presidential election has sometimes been followed by victories for the opposite party in midterm elections. According to Judis and Teixeira, the Republican takeover of the House in 1994—which interrupted the realignment signaled by Clinton's victory in 1992—was just "the Indian summer of an old realignment rather than the spring of a new one." If so, it has been the longest Indian summer on record. By the next midterm election in 2014, Republicans will have controlled the House for sixteen of the last twenty years. To Judis, elections like 2002 or 2010 are just "speed bumps" in the ongoing Democratic realignment.40 Perhaps, but given that the 2010 midterm election delivered more House seats to the Republican Party than any election since 1938, "speed bump" may not be the best appropriate metaphor; "brick wall" comes to mind.

At this moment, the still-emerging Democratic realignment is twenty years old. It has lasted as long as the period between realignments was supposed to last, according to the classic works in the field. And yet it has not yielded what realignments are supposed to yield. Control of the White House has oscillated between the Democratic and Republican parties—largely following the economic fundamentals in each election year. Control of Congress has oscillated as well, with the Democrats having control in the Senate about half the time but Republicans controlling the House for most of this period. And even Judis believes that this realignment will not bring Democrats to power in Congress any time soon or bring about policy shifts in the liberal direction because of the "machinery of interest groups and lobbies."41

But what about the future? Perhaps the Democratic realignment that thus far seems elusive is only now picking up steam, as the electorate is comprised more and more of groups—especially younger voters and Latinos—than lean Democratic. Will current demographic trends finally bring about a Democratic realignment at last? We are skeptical, or at least far more cautious than some commentators.

Both proponents and skeptics of the emerging Democratic majority seem to agree on this much: 2012 hardly suggests that the Democrats' mantle can rest in their laurels. The growth in demographic groups that currently lean Democratic is slow enough that they are best thought of as a thumb on the scales in the Democrats' favor, and no more. The changing complexion of the electorate will not insulate Democrats from a year in which the fundamentals favor Republicans. We agree with Teixeira himself, who wrote several months after the election:
Political reality is far more complicated than suggested by the neat orderly progression of classic realignment theory, political scientists argue. Nothing is inevitable in American politics: everything is contingent. There are no automatic majorities and certainly no permanent majorities.

I am open to all this. Democrats will certainly not win every election for decades, no matter how big their demographic advantages. Decisions made by parties and the consequences of those decisions (e.g., for economic growth and distribution) certainly will be central to the ability of any party to win elections in a sustained fashion.  

This leaves the issue of whether and how much, despite the continued relevance of the economy and other short-term factors, the underlying terrain has shifted in the Democrats’ favor. In part, this depends on the answers to two questions.

First, will the constituent groups of the “Obama coalition,” such as young people and Latinos, remain as loyal to the Democratic Party and as motivated to vote as they were in 2008 or 2012? The good news for Democrats is that this generation of young people will likely remain disproportionately Democratic. Political identities tend to crystallize in early adulthood and remain stable over the lifespan. A thirty-year-old Democrat will probably be a Democrat when he or she is eighty.

There is an important qualification, however. The political leanings of any generation tend to reflect the political events they experienced in late adolescence and young adulthood. This generation of young people came of age during a time that was hardly favorable to the Republican Party. There was a lengthy and inconclusive Iraq War, a punishing recession, and an unpopular Republican president, George W. Bush. However, the next generation may come of age during an unsuccessful Democratic administration or a successful Republican administration—and then end up tilting toward the Republicans, as did young people who came of age during the Reagan administration. Indeed, early surveys of high-school age youth suggest that they are not as favorable to Obama as are young adults. Of course, we want to be cautious extrapolating from the views of high school students to their views as young adults. But we should also be cautious extrapolating the views of today’s young adults to the generations that come after them.

The future political tilt and motivation of racial and ethnic minorities are also uncertain. The “Obama realignment” may prove to involve only a coalition specific to Obama. When he is no longer at the top of the ticket, will groups like Latinos and African Americans turn out in such numbers and with such strong support for the Democratic candidate? Although 79% of African Americans are “very enthusiastic” about the Democratic Party now, only 47% say they will be after Obama’s presidency ends.  

It is unlikely that African Americans are going to vote for a Republican candidate in large numbers, but will they turn out at such a high rate for whichever Democrat wants to succeed Obama?

The second question is whether the Republicans can make inroads into this coalition. The GOP does not need to win 73% of the Latino vote to win a presidential election. Even 40% might suffice. Is that possible? It is true, as we noted in chapter 7, that Latinos view the Republican Party as less concerned about them than the Democratic Party. But this does not mean that a particular Republican candidate could not win more of their votes than did Romney. For example, in a January 2012 Latino Decisions poll, Jeb Bush had a 67% approval rating among Hispanics in Florida, while Romney had a 40% rating and Obama a 60% rating. Another piece of data: in the Latino Decisions exit poll, 31% of Latino voters said they would be more likely to vote for the Republican Party if it supported comprehensive immigration reform.

Of course, these data speak to hypothetical outcomes, and Republicans may need to do more than just embrace immigration reform and nominate Jeb Bush. But these findings should also give Democrats pause. Party coalitions are fairly stable election to election, and it is unlikely that Latinos will suddenly swing en masse to the Republican Party. But can the Republican Party do well enough among Latinos to win the White House? What about in a year when economic fundamentals are in Republicans’ favor? Latinos’ Democratic leaning does not mean they will ignore the fundamentals. Questions such as these make us unwilling to declare a Democratic realignment under way.

Ultimately, politics has much more contingency than notions of realignment suggest. As political scientist David Mayhew has written, “Any kind of contingency-free theorizing about real politics has serious limitations.” The fortunes of political parties rise and fall with the underlying fundamentals. Each political party adapts to counter the advantages of the other. It did not do the Democrats any favors to imagine their victory in 2008 was a mandate, and it will not do them any favors to imagine that 2012 was either a mandate or a realignment. The same will apply to Republicans the next time they win a presidential election. The country remains too closely divided politically for either party to assume we are at or approaching the End of History.

The Republican Reboot

The lesson that many people draw when a party loses a presidential election is that the party needs to change. The Republican Party certainly received no
end of advice after the 2012 election. There were frequent calls for the party to embrace (or re-embrace) immigration reform (or not), same-sex marriage (or not), economic policies that would appeal to the middle class rather than the wealthy (or not), and so on. Perhaps some of that advice was sensible. Maybe support for immigration reform is a necessary, if not sufficient, step in gaining votes from Latinos in future elections. And it may make sense to support same-sex marriage, simply to be on the right side of majority opinion.

Nevertheless, the lessons we draw are somewhat different. If the 2012 was no mandate for Obama and presaged no Democratic realignment and if, as we have argued, Obama’s victory was consistent with the underlying economic fundamentals, then this puts a very different light on how the Republican Party should have reacted to its loss.

The 2012 election was not one that Republicans “should” have won. This is not to say that they were destined to lose, just that the fundamentals in the country favored Obama. Romney may not have been the strongest candidate on every dimension—likability, for instance—but simply eliminating such disadvantages relative to Obama probably would not have won him the election. Given all of this, Republicans could have looked back on the election and said, “Well, it is no fun losing, but it is hard to beat an incumbent president when the economy is growing even slowly. We needed to be exceptional to win and he only needed to be average.” Paul Ryan even acknowledged this in September 2013, saying, “It’s never easy to beat an incumbent” (though of course he promised that “we’re going to beat him”).

Moreover, the same fundamentals suggest that Republicans can be at least somewhat optimistic about their chances in 2016. Although a lot will hinge on the rate of economic growth that year, Republicans can take heart in this: since the passage of the Twenty-Second Amendment limiting an incumbent president to two consecutive terms, only once—the period 1980–92—has one party controlled the White House for more than two consecutive terms. This regularity—present in our forecasting model in chapter 2—boosts the Republican Party’s chances in 2016.

Another question that the Republican Party is debating is whether it needs to change its ideological stripes. Every faction within the party—moderate, conservative, and so forth—believes that the party would do better if only it would move in their direction. But maybe the problem is not really ideology. We have shown that the public has grown more conservative, not more liberal, during Obama’s presidency, excepting issues like same-sex marriage where there are broader secular trends afoot. We have shown that Romney was arguably among the more moderate of the Republican presidential hopefuls and that he was perceived as ideologically closer to more voters during the general election than was Obama.

All of this suggests that the Republican Party’s loss in 2012 was mainly about performance—specifically, that Obama had “performed” well enough, as judged by the fundamentals—and less about policy. It may be that the Republicans would benefit from endorsing same-sex marriage or immigration reform, and endorsing those policies is no small matter, as those positions will provoke opposition within some parts of the party. But those steps alone do not amount to a fundamental rethink of the party’s platform. Winning back the White House may not require it.

A final piece of advice often given to the Republican Party has little to do with message and more to do with tactics. Many Republicans envied the Obama campaign for its sophisticated use of data, its sprawling field operation, its innovative new digital tools. These Republicans argued that the GOP needs a reboot in terms of its campaign mechanics. Often this argument targeted the “old guard” of Republican consultants, especially the senior strategists of the Romney campaign. This argument was often a bit diffuse and at times silly. Romney strategist Stuart Stevens was criticized for, of all things, not tweeting enough.

One could perhaps distill a more sensible lesson within this critique, however: play “moneymail.” This means that the Republican Party needs to catch up to the Democratic Party in its ability to target voters and figure out how best to mobilize and persuade those voters. We agree that there is value in doing so, inasmuch as social science—whose findings have been incorporated and extended by groups working on the political left—can provide rigorous evidence about effective campaign tactics. Certainly the Obama campaign’s innovations made it more efficient, thereby generating more bang for the buck. For example, the Obama campaign learned how to raise more money by experimenting with the text of email solicitations. It also used more detailed data on television viewing habits to place advertisements during television programs that did not command an expensive rate for advertisers but were watched by significant numbers of voters the campaign was targeting. This greater efficiency actually echoes how the Oakland Athletics used “moneymail”: to find players that were not only talented but cost a lot less.

But we have also shown that campaign tactics alone were likely not responsible for Obama’s victory. The Obama campaign, for all its innovations, was not necessarily the deciding factor in this race. Thus Republicans may find in 2016 that even if their campaign does not emulate Obama’s in every respect, they may win anyway. Campaigning may move votes, much as it did in 2012, but not necessarily enough votes to constitute the winning margin.

In sum, it is rash to write off the Republican Party as a spent electoral force. If the economy slides backward before the 2016 election, they may find themselves favored. Of course, even with the economy on their side, this does
not mean that the Republicans could nominate just any candidate and win. As the experiences of Barry Goldwater and George McGovern suggest, candidates who are perceived as ideologically out of step with the electorate are punished at the ballot box. Fortunately, history suggests that losing parties are smarter than this; the longer a party is out of the White House, the more moderate its nominees become. Guessing who the nominees will be is little better than a parlor game at this point, and we will not speculate. The point is simply this: history tells us that the combination of the fundamental conditions in the country, the qualities of the two candidates at the top of the ticket, and the strength of their respective campaigns could just as easily favor the Republicans in 2016 as they could favor the Democrats—even if the Republican Party does not reinvent itself between now and then.

The Math We Do

About 11:25 PM on Election Night, November 6, Karl Rove was in the Fox News studio alongside anchors Chris Wallace and Megyn Kelly, and he was not pleased. The night had been remarkably free of drama so far but not in the way Rove had hoped: Barack Obama appeared to be winning handily. And now the Fox News decision desk, consisting of two political scientists and other elections data analysts, had just made a consequential call: Obama would win Ohio, securing him the presidency. Then the drama began.

The Romney campaign immediately emailed Wallace to object, and Rove agreed, directly contradicting the decision desk and saying: "We gotta be careful about calling things when we have like 99 votes separating the two candidates and a quarter of the vote yet to count. Even if they have made it on the basis of select precincts, I'd be very cautious about intruding in this process." At 11:32, Kelly was then dispatched to the decision desk to interview its staff on air, one of whom, Arnon Mishkin, confirmed that they were "quite comfortable" with the call. When Kelly returned to the studio and Rove continued to object, he implicitly answered a question Kelly had asked Rove earlier in the evening, when things already looked grim for Romney: "Is this just math that you do as a Republican to make yourself feel better or is this real?"

This episode was a microcosm of a broader debate about the state of the horse race in the fall of 2012—the one pitting most election forecasters and polling aggregators on one side, and the "unskewed polls" adherents on the other. A central lesson of this book is "do the math," which is precisely what Rove and devotees of the "unskewed polls" did not want to do. We have made clear that "the math" does not generate perfect answers or complete certainty. But we have shown that it can take us far in understanding presidential campaigns and elections. Doing the math can help candidates and the media alike.

For candidates, "the math" has two implications. One has to do with the fundamentals. Many a campaign begins and then unceremoniously ends because candidates do not grasp what the fundamentals suggest about their campaign. In the primary, candidates need broad support within the party, what is most visibly expressed in endorsements from party leaders. It is hard to win with media and momentum alone, as Perry, Cain, Gingrich, and Santorum all discovered. It is also hard for candidates to believe this. We talked with strategists for one ultimately unsuccessful Republican candidate on the eve of the Iowa caucus. They outlined this candidate's path to victory, which entailed a stronger-than-expected showing in Iowa, then a victory in South Carolina, and then several other more steps. The more we listened, the more this plan sounded like the equivalent of a trick shot in billiards—stunning but improbable. The point is not that candidates with a small chance of winning should not run. There may be reasons for candidates to run for their party's presidential nomination even when they lose—and competition in elections is usually a good thing. The point is that candidates do themselves no favors when they do not appear to understand what it really takes to win.

In the general election, both parties' nominees can do nothing but campaign hard, even if the underlying fundamentals are not favorable. But understanding the fundamentals accurately can help the campaign strategize smarter. The Romney campaign's laser-focus on the economy suggested that they believed that the economy favored them. But it arguably favored Obama, which suggests that the Romney campaign needed to do more than blame the president for the pace of the economic recovery.

The other lesson for candidates, and campaign practitioners too, is to have a more modest view about what the campaign itself can do. At times, practitioners acknowledge the limitations in what they can accomplish. They talk about how few voters are really up for grabs, or how they expect television ads or the field organization to produce only a small effect—the proverbial "field goal unit," as Obama advisor David Plouffe said. But then after the campaign is over, the loser's campaign receives too much blame and the winner's campaign too much credit—including from the winners themselves. After the election, Bill Burton, the head of the Priorities USA, praised their ads attacking Romney for his time at Bain Capital: "They were emotional. People could connect on a visceral level." He went on to say that the Obama campaign was "strategic and had a clear sense of what they wanted to say about who Mitt Romney was." He added, "We were relentless." In reality, campaign
advertising had a measurable impact in 2012, but not one that likely determined the outcome, no matter how "relentless" the Obama campaign was.

Our view is that candidates should and indeed must campaign vigorously. It is precisely when one side out-campaigned the other that the polls may shift in its direction. But the combination of two vigorous campaigns is often a tie, as the two sides offset each other. It may seem perverse for a candidate to spend more than a billion dollars only to ensure a tie, but to do otherwise amounts to unilateral disarmament. We have also shown that most of the effects of campaign advertising wear off quickly. This might suggest that a campaign should wait and spend most of its money in the final week. We would not advise that either. We have documented the short-lived effects of ads only amid a hotly contested campaign. For one side to cede the airwaves to the other side until the end would create a very different campaign—one that has not been observed in contemporary presidential elections and one that we could only speculate about. In such a campaign, the candidate who did advertise might build up enough of a lead in the battleground states that a late and powerful blitz by the other candidate would be insufficient. While most of the effects of campaign advertising wear off quickly, a small fraction remains and builds. This long-term accumulation, coupled with the effects of new advertising every day, makes a sustained advertising advantage important. But sustaining that advantage is difficult in a competitive race. In short, presidential candidates can expect their campaigning to make some difference, but because both sides do so much of it with approximately the same level of skill, neither side can expect its campaign to outweigh any advantage or disadvantage bestowed by the fundamentals.

The lesson of this book for the media is that the tools of political or social science—the extant research, the reliance on hard data—can actually serve the incentives of journalists. To say so might sound surprising. It is often assumed that political science is of little use to journalists, precisely because it casts doubt on the campaign "game-changers" that make for great headlines. But drawing on political science and incorporating quantitative rigor serve two other goals that journalists have:

One is accuracy. Journalists want to get the story right. Consider this from a Politico article published the week before the election:

Gov. Mitt Romney's campaign says it still has momentum. President Barack Obama's campaign says that's all spin. Meanwhile, there isn't a single well-informed pundit between them who can tell you who's right...pundits know that the trajectory of the campaign can turn on a dime. A change in a candidate's message, new revelations unearthed by the media, an unfortunate gaffe—all of these things could change voter sentiment in Ohio, Florida, Virginia or any of the other battleground states and tip the scales in the last days of the election.¹³

In actuality, "well-informed" people had a very good idea of who was going to win the race. All of the major aggregations of public polls showed that Obama was likely to win. Moreover, studies of previous presidential elections have showed that polls conducted a week before the election have had a very good track record of predicting who would win.²⁴ Perhaps "pundits" were unable to see that, but journalists have the ability to go beyond what pundits say and examine the data and research themselves.

Another goal of journalists is to be skeptical about what the candidates and their campaigns say. Campaigns are forever pushing their own spin on events, and journalists know better than to believe it. This produces any number of news stories that investigate, fact-check, and critique the candidates' claims. So when candidates or their spokespeople go around promoting some moment as a potential game-changer, journalists can draw on moneyball—from political science, poll numbers, history, and so on—to identify that as spin, too. For example, the Romney campaign was free to go around claiming that they had momentum late in the race. Indeed, since they were behind at that point, it made sense for them to claim to be gaining ground. But there was no reason for reporters to imply that this was true when the polls had not moved for three weeks. The lesson is simple. Journalists have to report what the campaigns are saying and doing on any given day—that is their job—but when journalists evaluate what the campaigns are saying and doing, they can use social science and a closer look at the available data to separate truth from spin.

A World with Fewer Game-Changers

In this book, we have made three arguments about presidential campaigns. First, the relevant fundamentals structure outcomes in both the primaries and the general election. The candidate whom the fundamentals advantage tends to win. Second, media coverage and electioneering by the candidates can affect voters. But this occurs only when these things strongly favor one candidate at the expense of the other. This happens with some frequency in presidential primaries—and certainly it happened in 2012—but it happens much more rarely in presidential general elections. Third, when one side out-campaigned the other, the differences have an impact but one that is often short-lived. An advantage that one side has today may be gone by tomorrow. Thus to have a durable impact, one side must sustain this advantage—something that is not easy to do in the general election campaign.
We have put forth these arguments as a counterpoint to a view of presidential campaigns that constantly emphasizes "game-changers." Game-changing moments, especially ones that affect who wins or loses, are few and far between. This raises a final question: is the lack of game-changers a good thing or a bad thing for our democracy? Would elections be better or worse as links between the governed and those who govern them if things like television advertising, candidate debates, and inadvertent gaffes were more important than they seem to be? In other words, would elections be better or worse if there were more game-changers? A complete answer would require another book, but we will hazard a short answer that can at least serve as a provocation if nothing else.

The answer depends a great deal on what the game-changer is and how or why voters respond. What if a candidate made an innocuous mistake that was somehow decisive for many voters? Surely there are better criteria for choosing a candidate than some flub or off-the-cuff remark that commentators deemed a "gaffe." But what if the candidate made a comment like Todd Akin's about "legitimate rape"? That may be a more credible basis for voters to change their minds, since it signals something about Akin's views on abortion, a public policy issue of some consequence. (Akin's defenders would argue his comment was misconstrued.) The same is true of ads or debates. If some ads stretch or misrepresent the truth, then it is good that the effects of an advertising advantage are probably too small and temporary to determine the winner. If the debates are framed as theater by the media—as when one commentator opined that "Romney looked and sounded presidential" after the first debate—and voters therefore react more to the theater than the substance of what either candidate said, then it is good that presidential debates rarely decide the winner. But ads can be truthful and contain useful information, and debates often feature substantive exchanges that reveal important differences between the candidates.

Of course, the "right" criteria for voting are not easy to agree on. One could argue that "the fundamentals" are not perfect criteria either. After all, the president has at best a limited impact on the nation's economy and deserves far less credit or blame than he receives. But given that a lot of the allegedly game-changing moments in 2012 did involve gaffes that were not all that revealing and ads that were half-true at best, we may be better-off in a world of "game-samers."