

LET'S REVISIT: WHAT'S AT STAKE...

You could call it the revenge of the nerds: the triumph of geeky science over faith and finger-crossing. The chief analytics officer for the Obama campaign said of the young data crunchers tasked with coming up with a turnout forecast in the Cave in the campaign's Chicago office, "We're kind of a weird bunch of kids. I haven't seen the sun for a while."¹¹⁵ An article about the campaign's tech team was called "When the Nerds Go Marching In."¹¹⁶ And one campaign official said, "It's about turning over control to some nerds. And more than any other year, campaign leadership really took that leap of faith."¹¹⁷

Getting out the vote, which used to be a matter of old-fashioned, face-to-face retail politics, now begins in dark rooms filled with glowing computer screens. The personal touch is still important, but the science of campaigning has come a long way even from the beginning of this century. It was 2004 when Republican political guru Karl Rove broke new ground in the George W. Bush reelection campaign by microtargeting supporters and mobilizing a strong turnout for the incumbent. Democrats were caught off guard, but by 2012 they had caught up.

One writer who has studied the science of campaigning says that the Obama campaign was better than its opponents in getting out the vote because the entire door-to-door element of the campaign was backed up by powerful data analysis that told the canvassers who to target and how to persuade. A campaign doesn't want to waste time on the unpersuadable, and the nerdy Obama analytics team had eliminated the guesswork. This writer says,

With an eager pool of academic collaborators in political science, behavioral psychology, and economics linking up with curious political operatives and hacks, the left has birthed an unexpected subculture. It now contains a

full-fledged electioneering intelligentsia, focused on integrating large-scale survey research with randomized experimental methods to isolate particular populations that can be moved by political contact.¹¹⁸

The Romney campaign had tried to construct a system that would help garner information on Election Day, but it was years behind the Obama team, in part because it had rejected what science could do for it. One analysis points out three miscalculations the campaign made.¹¹⁹ First, when the polls said that the electorate had a lot of Democrats in it, but the Romney campaign members' impressions of the enthusiasm on their side made them doubt the polls, they rejected the science and altered the partisan balance in their model to fit their intuition. Second, they believed that doing well with independents meant they were bound to win, without researching who the independent voters were. In hindsight, it became apparent that fewer voters were self-identifying as Republicans in the polls and were calling themselves independents instead. By adopting voter models that subtracted Democrats and bolstered the percentages of Republicans while also counting independents, the Romney campaign model was essentially double-counting some of its voters. And, finally, the campaign members were confident that the voters who said they were undecided would break for Romney at the last minute, again basing their expectations on what they guessed would happen.

The geeky Obama campaign, having cast its lot with science, knew that none of those things were true. What's at stake in how a campaign gets out its vote is winning, and the mistakes of the Romney campaign will be ones no campaign can afford to make in the future.