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Academic 'Dream Team' Helped Obama's Effort

By **BENEDICT CAREY**

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

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

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

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

This election season the Obama campaign won a [reputation for drawing on the tools of social science](#). The book “[The Victory Lab](#),” by Sasha Issenberg, and news reports have portrayed an operation that ran its own experiment and, among other efforts, consulted with the Analyst Institute, a Washington voter research group established in 2007 by union officials and their allies to help Democratic candidates.

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

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

When asked about the outside [psychologists](#), the Obama campaign would neither confirm nor deny a relationship with them. “This campaign was built on the energy, enthusiasm and

ingenuity of thousands of grass-roots supporters and our staff in the states and in Chicago,” said Adam Fetcher, a campaign spokesman. “Throughout the campaign we saw an outpouring of individuals across the country who lent a wide variety of ideas and input to our efforts to get the president re-elected.”

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

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

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

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

For example, Dr. Fiske’s research has shown that when deciding on a candidate, people generally focus on two elements: competence and warmth. “A candidate wants to make sure to score high on both dimensions,” Dr. Fiske said in an interview. “You can’t just run on the idea that everyone wants to have a beer with you; some people care a whole lot about competence.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Obama volunteers also asked people if they had a plan to vote and if not, to make one, specifying a time, according to Stephen Shaw, a retired [cancer](#) researcher who knocked on doors in Nevada and Virginia in the days before the election. “One thing we’d say is that we know that when people have a plan, voting goes more smoothly,” he said.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 13, 2012

An earlier version of this article omitted a word from the title of the book by Sasha Issenberg that examines data-driven strategies in political campaigns. It is "The Victory Lab," not "Victory Lab."