

GOP moves to catch up with Democrats on technology

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WASHINGTON (AP)

-- Embarrassed by how the last presidential election exposed their yesteryear technology, Republicans are turning to a younger generation of tech-savvy social media experts and software designers to improve communications with voters, predict their behavior and track opponents more vigorously.

After watching President Barack Obama win re-election with help from a technology operation unprecedented in its sophistication, GOP officials concede an urgent need for catch up.

"I think everybody realized that the party is really far behind at the moment and they're doing everything within their realistic sphere of influence to catch up," said Bret Jacobson, a partner with Red Edge, a Virginia-based digital advocacy firm that represents the Republican Governors Association, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Heritage Foundation.

Democrats began using related technology years ago, giving Obama a significant advantage last fall in customizing personalized fundraising and get-out-the-vote appeals to prospective supporters. With the blessing of party leaders, a new crop of Republican-backed outside groups is developing tools to do the same in 2014 and 2016.

Alex Skatell, former digital director for the GOP's gubernatorial and Senate campaign operations, leads one new group that has been quietly testing a system

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that would allow Republicans to share details about millions of voters - their personal interests, group affiliations and even where they went to school.

With no primary opponent last year, Obama's re-election team used the extra time to build a large campaign operation melding a grass-roots army of 2.2 million volunteers with groundbreaking technology to target voters. They tapped about 17 million email subscribers to raise nearly \$700 million online.

Data-driven analytics enabled the campaign to run daily simulations to handicap battleground states, analyze demographic trends and test alternatives for reaching voters online.

Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, in contrast, had only a few months after a lengthy primary fight to try to match Obama's tech advantage. He couldn't make up the difference. Romney's technology operation was overwhelmed by the intense flow of data and temporarily crashed on Election Day.

A 100-page report on how to rebound from the 2012 election, released last week by Republican Party Chairman Reince Priebus, includes several technology recommendations.

"The president's campaign significantly changed the makeup of the national electorate and identified, persuaded and turned out low-propensity voters by unleashing a barrage of human and technological resources previously unseen in a presidential contest," the report said. "Marrying grass-roots politics with technology and analytics, they successfully contacted, persuaded and turned out their margin of victory. There are many lessons to be learned from their efforts, particularly with respect to voter contact."

Skatell, 26, is leading one new effort by Republican allies to fill the void. His team of designers, software developers and veteran Republican strategists is now testing what he calls an "almost an eHarmony for matching volunteers with persuadable voters" that would let campaigns across the country share details in real time on voter preferences, harnessing social media like Facebook and Twitter.

Other groups are working to improve the GOP's data and digital performance.

The major Republican ally, American Crossroads, which spent a combined \$175 million on the last election with its sister organization, hosted private meetings last month focused on data and technology. Drawing from technology experts in Silicon Valley, the organization helped craft a series of recommendations expected to be rolled out later this year.

"A good action plan that fixes our deficiencies and identifies new opportunities can help us regain our advantage within a cycle or two," said Crossroads spokesman Jonathan Collegio.

A prominent group of Republican aides has also formed America Rising, a company that will have a companion "super" political action committee that can raise

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unlimited contributions without having to disclose its donors. Its purpose is to counter Democratic opposition research groups, which generated negative coverage of Romney and GOP candidates last year.

America Rising will provide video tracking, opposition research and rapid response for campaign committees, super PACs and individual candidates' campaigns but does not plan to get involved in GOP primaries. It will be led by Matt Rhoades, who served as Romney's campaign manager, and Joe Pounder, the research director for the Republican National Committee. Running its super PAC will be Tim Miller, a former RNC aide and spokesman for former GOP presidential candidate Jon Huntsman.

Romney and several Republican candidates were monitored closely by camera-toting Democratic aides during the campaign, a gap that Miller said American Rising hopes to fill on behalf of Republicans.

Brad Woodhouse, a spokesman for the Democratic National Committee, said his party has "a several years' lead on data and analytics infrastructure and we're not standing still."

Of the GOP effort, Woodhouse said, "We don't see them closing the gap anytime soon."

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