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## In a Tight Race, Obama Draws on the Levers of His Power

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WASHINGTON — For months, government lawyers and economists worked behind the scenes to develop a trade case against China. Then last month came a eureka moment: They confirmed the existence of a Chinese subsidy program for automobiles and parts that in their view violated international trade rules. They finished a complaint, circulated it among agencies and proposed a time frame for filing.

That's when President Obama's political team took over, providing a textbook example of how an incumbent can harness the power of the office to bolster the case for re-election. Rather than leave it to the trade office to announce the complaint, Mr. Obama decided to do it himself. Aides scheduled it for a campaign swing to the auto-dependent battleground state of Ohio, leaked it to the state's largest newspaper, then sent other journalists a link to the resulting story plus voter-friendly talking points.

Every president lives at the intersection of policy and politics, never more so than during a campaign season. Locked in a tight race with Mitt Romney, Mr. Obama and his team have been pulling every lever of the federal government within reach, announcing initiatives aimed at critical constituencies, dispatching cabinet secretaries to competitive areas, coordinating campaign events to match popular government actions and forestalling or even reversing other government decisions that could hurt the president's chances of a second term.

On Friday, Mr. Obama will designate Chimney Rock in Colorado a national monument, preserving thousands of acres and aiding tourism in another swing state, a

decision shared Wednesday with a Denver newspaper. When he flew to Iowa last month, Mr. Obama arrived just as his administration announced drought relief for farmers and released a report promoting his support for wind power. After critics attacked him for inhibiting oil and gas production by considering an obscure lizard for the endangered species list, the administration decided it wasn't so endangered after all.

Some of the most significant policy announcements of recent months were keyed to important voter blocs. Mr. Obama reversed position to endorse same-sex marriage before attending a big-dollar fund-raiser with gay and lesbian leaders. Just before addressing a national Latino organization, he used executive power to allow illegal immigrants to remain in the country if they had come as children.

White House officials acknowledged that they calibrate announcements and trips to maximize the advantages of incumbency but said the policy decisions themselves were made on substance. They also noted that while cabinet secretaries travel to swing states, they also travel to states that are not competitive. And they said that on some level it is impossible to separate the candidate from the president.

"The president is not going to put off what he believes are important actions, such as protecting jobs for American workers, until after the election," said Eric Schultz, a White House spokesman. "These decisions are made on the merits by professionals with the relevant policy expertise, are often months in the making and always reflect the president's longstanding positions."

Republicans, naturally, see it differently. “He looks like he is aiding his re-election with the power of the Oval Office,” said Matt Schlapp, who was White House political director for President George W. Bush. “He looks worried, reactive. It’s fair to ask that if this China decision was for policy issues alone then why wait until right before the first debate to announce it?”

Each White House tests the boundaries. President Bill Clinton used the Lincoln Bedroom to entertain financial donors. Mr. Bush’s strategist, Karl Rove, oversaw an “asset deployment team” that managed trips and grant announcements. Both got in trouble. Mr. Clinton’s fund-raising triggered Congressional investigations while the Office of Special Counsel, an independent agency, concluded that the Bush White House violated federal law by creating a “political boiler room” coordinating campaign activities.

The same agency determined last week that Kathleen Sebelius, the health and human services secretary, violated the law by advocating Mr. Obama’s re-election during an official trip to North Carolina. The trip was reclassified to political and the cost reimbursed. “Keeping the roles straight can be a difficult task, particularly on mixed trips that involve both campaign and official stops on the same day,” Ms. Sebelius wrote investigators.

Other cabinet secretaries have had active travel schedules to important electoral states. Since July, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has traveled to at least 15 states for public events, according to his schedule, including Wisconsin, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Florida and Colorado. During the same period in 2010, he traveled to 10 states, according to agency records. At various stops, Mr. Salazar promoted Mr. Obama’s energy and conservation policies.

Mr. Salazar took an airboat tour of the Everglades in Florida days after Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack visited to announce \$80 million for an Everglades protection program. Mr. Vilsack hinted at why that small chunk of Florida had received so much attention when he appeared at the opening of Mr. Obama’s campaign office in Port St. Lucie. “You win Florida and you win the presidency,” Mr. Vilsack said at the event. “And I have been told you win this region, you win Florida.”

While announcing new initiatives during campaign season is standard practice, Mr. Obama’s team also seems focused on stopping policies that may be politically hazardous. In June, the Interior Department rejected their own plans to designate a lizard known as the dunes sagebrush as endangered by oil and gas activities. After analysis, the department declared that “the lizard is no longer in danger of extinction.”

“The administration did not want to face criticism from the oil and gas industry during an election year,” said Taylor McKinnon, a public lands advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity.

Blake Androff, an Interior Department spokesman, said the decision was “based entirely on the best available science and in accordance with the law,” not politics, and came only after industry and state officials agreed to voluntary conservation measures.

He added that Mr. Salazar’s travel was also extensive in non-election years, reflecting the job of overseeing hundreds of millions of acres of public land. A spokesman for Mr. Vilsack said his Florida trip was planned so he could spend one day on official business and another stumping for Mr. Obama on his own time. But on Tuesday, the same day a reporter inquired about the mixing of politics and policy on the trip, the Obama campaign sent a check for \$1,606.24 to reimburse taxpayers for airfare and hotel — timing that Agriculture Department officials said was a coincidence.

When it came to the China case, officials said it was in the works for much of the year but took months to find evidence of unfair trading practices. They went down a number of blind alleys before getting the first indication of the Chinese subsidy program over the summer. Then last month, they determined it was real and deemed it a violation. At that point, officials said, there was no justification to delay filing.

And if it happened to help the campaign, Josh Earnest, a White House spokesman, told reporters, “I’ll let our opponents and all you guys assess whether or not there’s a political benefit for the president.”