Mike Allen thinks the 2012 election is more historic than the 2008 election when Barack Obama became the first African-American elected president.

“I believe it changed forever how people will run for office, nationally, statewide and in legislative districts,” Allen, Politico’s chief political correspondent, said during Saturday’s keynote luncheon address.

After the 2008 election, people thought the turnout of Obama voters was a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. That’s evidenced in the thinking of Republican pollsters, “which is why they were so wrong in their polls. The Obama campaign came shockingly close to replicating that once-in-a-lifetime event,” Allen said.

The campaign was successful in doing so, he said, because it adopted a strategy early on and stuck with it. The team decided to aim the campaign at women and minorities—especially targeting minorities—and talk about jobs and the auto bailout, shoving it “up Mitt Romney’s tailpipe in Ohio.”

A year later, that’s how the Obama team ran the campaign and won the election, Allen said.

Allen acknowledged that part of the success came from factors put in place years before the 2012 election. In 2008, a New York Times headline—Let Detroit Go Bankrupt—on a piece Romney had written about the auto bailout basically put him on the defensive on that issue, which turned out to be very decisive in the November elections.

In addition, the Obama campaign decided years ago to run a campaign much different from the one it ran in 2008. While 2008 was one of the most optimistic, broad and inclusive campaigns, the 2012 campaign was one of the most narrow, surgical and cynical campaigns, Allen said.

“You can’t run on change when you have the big house, the big car and the big plane,” he said.

What the campaign was able to do, Allen said, was make the election more personal, in a number of ways.

First, it identified potential Obama voters and worked to get them to the polls. They recognized, Allen said, that “99 percent of people had their minds made up about Barack Obama.”

Their objective, then, was to change who turned out to vote. “This is why this election changed how campaigns will be run,” Allen said.

Secondly, the campaign used technology to target voters and then used those voters to target other voters.

The Obama campaign in 2008 was the first to be scientific about collecting contact information like
email addresses so the campaign could connect with them.

“You could go see Senator Obama and Oprah, but the price of admission was giving up their data,” Allen said.

Allen recalled Obama campaign director Jim Messina’s comments regarding the 2012 campaign: “What we did in 2008 is going to look like Jurassic Park this time around.”

The campaign took it a step further this year. One of its big innovations was the use of existing supporters’ social networks. The campaign would email supporters suggesting they reach out to specific friends who are likely be supportive of Obama.

“In this new world the personal connection, what everyone in this room specializes in, will be more important,” Allen said.

People start to tune out the volumes of information they are receiving, but respond to the personal contacts.

“The key is efficiently optimizing those personal contacts,” he said.