
Polls and Elections

Campaign Field Offices and Voter Mobilization in 2012

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During the last several presidential elections, much attention has been paid to campaign field offices. A number of analyses have investigated the impact of field offices on vote choice, but there have been very few investigations of whether and to what extent campaign field offices influence voter turnout. Using data from the 2012 election, I examine the impact of Obama and Romney field offices on county-level turnout. I find that the presence of campaign field offices in counties across the United States increased turnout by a small amount. The results presented here add to the literature on campaign effects by showing that field offices—an increasingly important component of modern presidential campaigning—can influence levels of political engagement.

During the last several presidential elections, much attention has been paid to campaign field offices (Ball 2012; Keller 2012; Levendusky and Darr 2014; Masket 2009; Sinderbrand 2012). Indeed, Obama's impressive *ground game* during the 2008 election triggered an interest in understanding the role of field offices in presidential campaigns. Since the 2008 election, many interesting questions have developed surrounding campaign field offices. For example, how many field offices did each presidential campaign have? Where did the campaigns choose to locate field offices? What impact, if any, did field offices have on candidate vote share? These are important questions and all three of these have been investigated either by the media or academics interested in campaign effects. During the 2012 election, for example, a number of media outlets tracked the locations of Obama and Romney campaign offices across the United States. The disparity between Democratic and Republican field offices is something that also elicited a great deal of attention (Avlon and Keller 2012; Ball 2012; Keller 2012; Masket 2012). Masket

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(2009) provided a systematic analysis of the impact of field offices on candidate vote share in 2008 and found that Obama field offices increased the Democratic vote share by a small, but not inconsequential, amount (0.8% overall). Interestingly, Masket found that the effects of field offices were large enough to flip three battleground states from Republican to Democratic.

In a more recent analysis using Democratic field office data from 2004, 2008, and 2012, Levendusky and Darr (2014) examined the determinants of field office placement and the effects of field offices on candidate performance at the county level. Interestingly, Levendusky and Darr found that Democratic field offices increased Democratic vote share by about 1.04%. Sides and Vavreck (2013) also investigated the effects of field offices on Democratic vote share (focusing only on the 2012 election) and found that Obama's vote share was about three-tenths of a point higher in counties with one field office than in counties with no field office and about six-tenths of a point higher in counties where he had two or more offices. Interestingly, Sides and Vavreck found that Romney's field offices exerted a much smaller effect (and could not be estimated with as much statistical confidence). Given the goals of campaign field offices, it is not at all surprising that vote choice has been a dependent variable of great interest.

The impact of campaign field offices on turnout is something that has received fairly little attention to date. In their analysis of the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections, Levendusky and Darr (2014) did explore the impact of *Democratic field offices* on turnout. Their model indicated that turnout was about .44% higher in counties that had at least one Democratic field office. Because data on Republican field offices were not available prior to 2012, Levendusky and Darr focused only on the effects of Democratic field offices. They pointed out that their "results can only speak to the effects of Democratic offices, and we leave corresponding analysis of Republican effects (and questions about the relative effectiveness of these efforts between parties) for future work" (Levendusky and Darr 2014, 537). In this article, I build on Levendusky and Darr's turnout analysis by investigating the impact of Obama *and* Romney field offices on voter mobilization in 2012. Although many media reports suggested that field offices played an important role in voter mobilization (Jackson 2012; Sinderbrand 2012), there is no precise estimate of how much of an impact the Obama *and* Romney campaign field offices had on voter mobilization in 2012.

Field Offices and Voter Mobilization

The study of voter mobilization has a long and rich history in political science (Bergan et al. 2005; Gerber and Green 2008; Panagopoulos and Wielhouwer 2008). Given that voting represents one of the most basic political acts in a democracy, political scientists have an enduring interest in learning about the factors that influence political engagement. Although a great deal of research has focused on the importance of individual attributes, scholars have also recognized that a variety of variables related to the conduct of political campaigns may influence voter mobilization. Previous analyses on campaigns and voter mobilization have highlighted the effects of variables like

competition (Cox and Munger 1989), campaign spending (Caldeira, Paterson, and Markko 1985), candidate visits (Hill 2006; Holbrook and McClurg 2005), advertisements (Goldstein and Freedman 2002), and party transfers (Holbrook and McClurg 2005) and contacts (Panagopoulos and Francia 2009). Only just recently (Levendusky and Darr 2014) have political scientists started to integrate candidate field offices into models of voter turnout. Although the behavioral effects of campaigns are quite interesting from an academic standpoint, political candidates and campaign consultants also have good reason to wonder about the extent to which campaign activities influence turnout. Do the resources that campaigns devote to voter mobilization efforts actually stimulate turnout?

Generally speaking, studies on the impact of campaign activities have hypothesized that as campaigns become more active, voters become more informed, enthused, and motivated, which increases the likelihood that they will turn out to vote. Field offices represent one way of capturing the activity of campaigns across the United States. Generally speaking, I expect that places with campaign field offices will have higher levels of voter turnout than places without field offices. Campaign field offices engage in a variety of key activities designed to mobilize voters, including making phone calls, knocking on doors, and organizing campaign events. Indeed, one account of the Obama field office organization noted that

Obama outposts, no matter how small, weren't just window dressing; they filled a couple of key functions. Since each was staffed with at least one Obama for America staffer, they served as an initial point of contact with the campaign, and a recruitment center for local volunteers. They provided a central location for campaign events, for phone banking and for data collection. And their permanence allowed the campaign to develop vital local insight: to build detailed voter files on potential supporters, field test the best ways to motivate them, and push them to cast their votes weeks before Election Day. (Sinderbrand 2012)

Given scholarly ideas about campaigns and voter mobilization and media accounts about the role of field offices in 2012, it is important to investigate the effects of Democratic and Republican field offices in 2012. As recent research by Enos and Fowler (2014) has pointed out, some political observers have argued that campaign mobilization efforts had little effect in 2012, and others have argued that any effects that occurred during 2012 were largely due to the Obama campaign rather than Romney campaign. It is important to bring data to bear on these kinds of statements.

A Look at Field Office Locations in 2012

Before analyzing the effects of field offices on voter mobilization in 2012, it is worth taking a quick look at the location of Obama and Romney field offices across the United States. Figure 1 shows the location of campaign field offices in 2012. The geographic units here are counties, and the dots represent the location of field offices within the counties. Not surprisingly, field offices tend to be clustered in battleground states, which no doubt reflects the strategic calculus of campaign organizations.

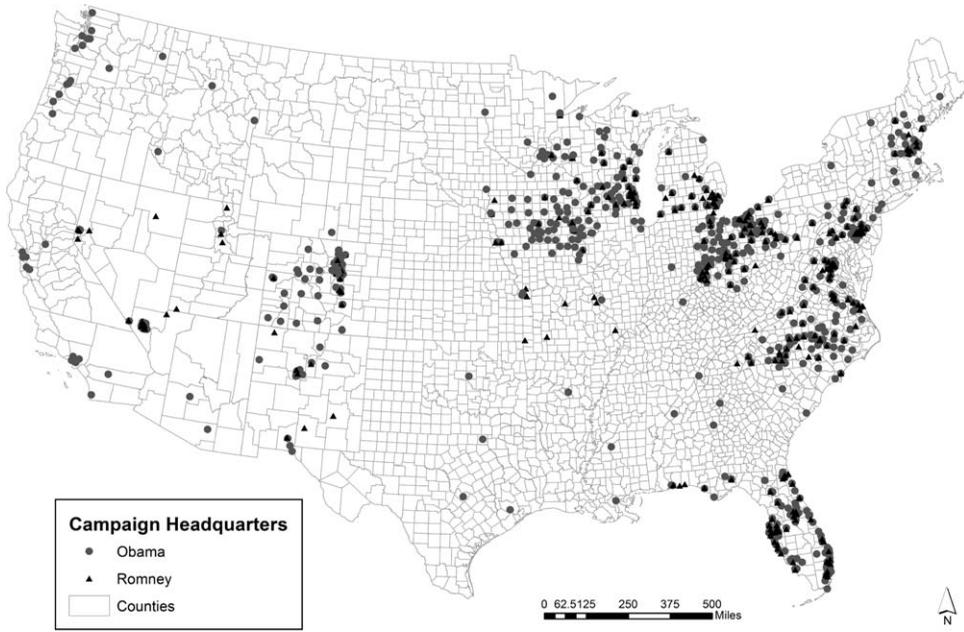


FIGURE 1. Location of Romney and Obama Field Offices in 2012.
Note: Map made using ArcGIS. Alaska and Hawaii not shown, but both states had one field office in 2012.

TABLE 1
Number of Romney Field Offices across U.S. Counties

<i>Number of Offices</i>	<i>Number of Counties with Corresponding Number of Offices</i>
0	2,889
1	188
2	22
3	7
4	6
6	1

Note: Data from Levendusky and Darr (2014).

Tables 1 and 2 provide a simple look at the number of field offices that each campaign had, along with the number of counties that had a given number of field offices. It is clear from the tables that there was a large disparity in the number of field offices across the campaigns. In total, the Obama campaign had 790 field offices across the United States, while the Romney campaign had 283 offices. During the 2008 election, the Obama campaign established over 700 field offices, while the McCain campaign established fewer than 400 offices (Masket 2009).

TABLE 2
Number of Obama Field Offices across U.S. Counties

<i>Number of Offices</i>	<i>Number of Counties with Corresponding Number of Offices</i>
0	2,656
1	336
2	64
3	17
4	10
5	8
6	5
7	6
8	2
9	3
10	1
11	1
12	1
13	2
21	1

Note: Data from Levendusky and Darr (2014).

Did Field Offices Influence Voter Turnout in 2012?

With an idea of how many field offices there were in 2012 and of where the offices were located, it is now appropriate to consider whether, and to what extent, field offices influenced turnout levels. As I noted above, Levendusky and Darr (2014) only examined the impact of *Democratic field offices* on turnout (because they pooled data from the past three elections and Republican field office data were not available by county in 2004 and 2008). A number of interesting questions remain. For instance, did Republican offices have an impact on turnout in 2012? How did the mobilizing effect of Democratic offices compare to the effect of Republican offices? To begin analyzing the effects of field offices on voter turnout, I examine the impact of the total number of field offices (Obama and Romney) in a county on voter turnout. The data I use come directly from the replication data set provided by Levendusky and Darr (2014), which contains county-level information on field offices and turnout in 2012. Table 3 shows the effect of the total number of campaign field offices in a county on voter turnout in 2012 (Model 1). I estimate all of the models in Table 3 using ordinary least squares, with state fixed effects. I include controls for county turnout in 2008 and a number of other demographic variables.¹ As expected, 2008 voter turnout has a positive effect on turnout in 2012 (and exerts a great deal of explanatory power). Importantly, even after accounting for previous turnout, demographics, and state fixed effects, the field office variable has a statistically significant

1. It could be the case that expected turnout drives office allocation decisions. To investigate this possibility, I used 2008 turnout and 2012 turnout to predict the number of campaign field offices. I did not find evidence that turnout was a statistically significant predictor of field offices.

TABLE 3
Effect of Field Offices on 2012 Voter Turnout at County Level, Ordinary Least Squares Regression

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model 1 b (se)</i>	<i>Model 2 b (se)</i>	<i>Model 3 b (se)</i>	<i>Model 4 b (se)</i>
Total Field Offices	.109 (.036)*	—	—	—
Obama Field Offices	—	.141 (.045)*	—	.116 (.042)*
Romney Field Offices	—	—	.297 (.112)*	.089 (.103)
2008 Turnout	95.690 (1.974)*	95.702 (1.976)*	95.597 (1.963)*	95.693 (1.977)*
Median Age	-.019 (.028)	-.020 (.028)	-.018 (.027)	-.020 (.028)
Median Income	.000 (.000)*	.000 (.000)*	.000 (.000)*	.000 (.000)*
Percent Black	.003 (.007)	.003 (.007)	.004 (.007)	.003 (.007)
Percent Hispanic	-.010 (.005)*	-.010 (.005)*	-.010 (.005)*	-.010 (.005)*
Percent with College Degree	-1.491 (.986)	-1.463 (.990)	-1.306 (.967)	-1.490 (.986)
Constant	-.840 (.787)	-.844 (.787)	-.869 (.790)	-.840 (.787)
N of Observations	3,108	3,108	3,108	3,108
Adjusted R ²	.95	.95	.95	.95

Notes: Cell entries are fixed-effects regression coefficients, controlling for state, predicting 2012 voter turnout. Robust clustered standard errors. * $p < .05$ (one-tailed).

($p < .05$, one-tailed) effect on voter turnout in 2012. Overall, the predicted turnout level for counties with the minimum number (0) of field offices is 44.25% (95% confidence interval [CI], 44.22%-44.27%) and the predicted turnout level for counties with the maximum number (27) of field offices is 47.20% (95% CIs, 45.30%-49.10%). This is a small boost (2.95%) in turnout, but it does provide evidence of a mobilization effect from campaigns.

Given the available data, it is also possible to estimate the effects of Romney and Obama field offices (separately) on turnout in 2012. Sides and Vavreck (2013) found that Obama field offices had a much more pronounced effect on Obama *vote share* than Romney offices, but what impact did the Obama and Romney field offices have on *turnout*? Model 2 in Table 3 shows the effect of Obama field offices on county-level voter turnout in 2012. Here, the field office variable measures the number of Obama offices in each county. Once again, even after accounting for previous turnout, demographics, and state fixed effects, the field office variable has a statistically significant ($p < .05$, one-tailed) effect on voter turnout in 2012. Counties that had high numbers of Obama field offices experienced higher turnout levels than those with low numbers of Obama offices. Model 3 in Table 3 shows the effect of the number of Romney field offices in each county on turnout (not controlling for the number of Obama field offices). It is interesting to note that the coefficient on the Romney variable is statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level (one-tailed) and positively signed. Taken together, Models 2 and 3 in Table 3 would seem to provide evidence that the field offices from both campaigns had important effects on turnout in 2012.

Of course, it is important to consider the effects of Obama and Romney offices on turnout *simultaneously*. Indeed, previous research on the effects of campaign field offices (see Sides and Vavreck 2013) has shown that campaign field offices can have differential effects. Model 4 in Table 3 provides a direct test of the mobilizing effects of both the Obama and Romney

field offices.² It is interesting to note that the coefficients on both field office variables in Model 4 are positively signed. However, the Obama field office variable is statistically significant ($p < .05$, one-tailed), while the Romney field office measure fails to achieve statistical significance at conventional levels when considered alongside the Obama field office measure. Interestingly, Sides and Vavreck (2013) found evidence that that the Obama campaign's field offices had a more pronounced effect on candidate vote share than Romney's offices.³ It appears that field offices in 2012 did have differential effects on voter turnout.

Conclusion

We often think about the effects of political campaigns on vote choice during elections. This is certainly an interesting question and one that is worth asking in the context of elections at all levels of office. It is important to remember, though, that although persuasion is the intent of most campaign activities, electoral campaigns also serve important civic functions. The information that campaigns provide via advertisements, campaign spending, and radio spots has an indirect mobilization effect by helping to reduce the information costs associated with voting. Of course, campaigns also engage in activities that are more directly aimed at engaging voters, such as get out the vote (GOTV) efforts. In this article, I investigated the impact of one component of modern presidential campaigning—field offices—on an important civic activity—voting. Using data from the 2012 election, I found evidence that field offices did exert an impact on voter turnout. Ever since Obama's extensive use of field offices during the 2008 election,⁴ there has been an interest in understanding the use and effects of campaign offices, although there has not been much attention devoted to study of field offices and turnout. Although the mobilization effects from field offices were not overwhelmingly large (at least not at the county level), they do represent campaign effects. Overall, the findings presented here fit well with previous research that has linked campaign (Hill 2006; Holbrook and McClurg 2005) and GOTV activities (Green and Gerber 2008) to political participation.

2. I should note that the same limitations outlined by Levendusky and Darr (2014) apply to this analysis, too. They note that

because field offices target specific neighborhoods and addresses while ignoring others, our estimates recover an imprecise average effect of field office activity. Second, we assume throughout that the effects of a field office in county X are confined to county X, and do not spill over across county (or state) borders. This too is likely false, as voters in (say) southern New Jersey and northern Delaware probably also spend time in nearby Philadelphia mobilizing voters. Given both of these points, we are likely underestimating the effects of field offices: if we had data on which specific individuals were being targeted, and which field offices had effects that spilled over beyond their county borders, we would probably recover a somewhat larger effect of field offices. (Levendusky and Darr 2014, 538)

It should also be noted that the data used here do not provide information on the number of staffers or other resources available at each office. It seems reasonable to think that larger staffs and more campaign resources would enhance the capacity of field offices, but such data are unfortunately not available.

3. Just to be clear, the above analysis does not provide any sense of how well the campaigns mobilized their respective supporters, as Enos and Fowler (2014) are able to do, because the data are at the county level rather than at the individual level.

4. Field offices were used in 2004, just not to the extent that they were in 2008.

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