

# Mobilization and Counter-Mobilization: Candidate Visits in the 2016 Presidential Election

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November 15, 2018

Political scientists studying the impact of campaign visits by presidential candidates and other forms of campaign activity have come to conflicting conclusions on whether campaigns can change voter behavior in even small ways. In this paper, we argue that, while scholars have generally interpreted campaign effect results as being uni-directional, the traditional metrics of such effects - polls and aggregate vote results - inherently reflect a net effect combining any potential mobilization of a candidate's supporters, offset by any counter-mobilization of their opponents. If such counter-mobilization occurs, weak or null findings in the campaign effects literature may understate or miss the true impact of campaign activities on voter behavior. To assess whether campaign visits produce mixed effects, we measure the extent to which visits by presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 2016 presidential election produced increases in small campaign donations and voter registration rates in the immediate aftermath of a visit. Our results show that visits by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton inspired their supporters to donate and register at higher rates than they otherwise would have. However, we also find a considerable level of counter-mobilization: in particular, visits by Trump produced more donations to the Clinton campaign than to the Trump campaign, and more newly registered Democratic than Republican voters.

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In modern American presidential elections, campaigns commit significant resources to television advertising, candidate appearances, get-out-the-vote (GOTV) drives, and other efforts in an attempt to improve their candidate’s performance on election day. The extent to which these efforts are actually successful remains a topic of debate. Political scientists largely agree that the “fundamentals” - variables that affect voter preferences but are out of the control of candidates or their campaigns - are the strongest predictors of electoral outcomes (Gelman et al, 2016; Sides and Vavreck, 2013). There is less agreement, however, on whether campaign activities are able to affect vote choice in small, but potentially pivotal ways.

A number of studies have found campaign activities to have small but positive effects on candidate performance in opinion polls, election results, or voter turnout.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, studies of the same phenomena also often find null effects, and a recent meta-analysis of dozens of field experiments finds that campaign activities such as direct mail, phone calls, and canvassing have no persuasive effect on voters (Kalla and Broockman, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Research focused specifically on the effect of presidential candidate campaign visits - a common and highly visible strategy in campaigns - have come to similarly mixed conclusions: while a number of studies have documented positive effects from such visits (Hill, Rodriguez, and Wooden, 2010; Holbrook, 1994; Jones, 1998; King and Morehouse, 2004; Shaw, 1999; Shaw and Gimpel, 2012; Vavreck, Spiliotes, and Fowler, 2002; Wood, 2016), others find mixed (Heersink and Peterson, 2017; Herr, 2002; Holbrook, 2002) or null results (Holbrook and McClurg, 2005).

A complication in the study of campaign visits - and campaign effects broadly - is that the metrics scholars generally rely on capture not just a potential positive effect, but a *net* effect. Scholars mostly rely on either aggregate vote returns or individual-level polling data and interpret their results as reflecting a direct positive effect: campaign visits either persuade voters to support the visiting candidate, or they do not. Thus, when a study reports a null finding, this result is interpreted as evidence that the visit had no effect on voters’ choices. For example, Heersink and Peterson’s (2017) finding that Harry Truman’s 1948 campaign visits improved his performance by 3.06 points, on average, is presented as a positive uni-directional effect, while the visits of his opponent, Thomas Dewey, are seen as having had no effect.

In reality, such findings reflect a combination of at least two potential independent effects:

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<sup>1</sup>See, among many others, Darr and Levendusky, 2014; Gerber and Green, 2000; Gerber et al, 2013; Green, Gerber and Nickerson, 2003; Nickerson, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Note that Kalla and Broockman allow for the possibility that campaigns can stimulate voter turnout.

any increase in support for the visiting candidate, offset by any increase in support for their opponents. In this paper, we argue campaign activities - such as candidate visits - can theoretically have simultaneous but countervailing effects. Specifically, we argue that campaign visits may mobilize a candidate's base but can also counter-mobilize their opponent's base. If such countervailing effects are real, studies of campaign effects potentially misinterpret null findings to mean that campaign activities have no effect. While the net effect of an activity may indeed be indistinguishable from zero, a campaign visit could still have affected voter behavior in such a way that the impacts are real, but effectively cancel each other out.

To test this argument, we study mobilization and counter-mobilization in the wake of campaign visits during the 2016 presidential election. We estimate the extent to which visits by Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and their running mates, activated voters on both sides using two metrics of a visit's possible influence: small campaign donations and voter registration rates. While voter registration and fundraising may not be the core aims of a candidate visit<sup>3</sup> - and the actual effects on the election outcome are minimal - these metrics allow us to distinguish between Clinton and Trump supporters in a way that polls or aggregate election results do not, and thus to differentiate between mobilization and counter-mobilization effects.

This study is among the first to investigate countervailing effects in campaign visits by distinguishing between mobilization and counter-mobilization.<sup>4</sup> We find that campaign visits by Trump and Clinton spurred additional donations and prompted more voters to register. But our results suggest that a visit by the presidential candidates also increased donations and registrations among members of the *opposite* party as well. Indeed, the visits regularly produce a stronger counter-mobilization effect. This is particularly true for visits by Donald Trump: a typical Trump visit yielded a 28 percent increase in Republican registrants, compared to a 30 percent increase in newly registered Democrats. We find even starker results in terms of financial donations: a visit by Trump produced more donations for the Clinton campaign than for the Trump campaign. Indeed, a Trump visit benefited the Clinton camp more than visits by

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<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the varied potential goals of visits in presidential election campaigns, see Wood (2016).

<sup>4</sup>Shaw and Gimpel's (2012) study includes a discussion of countervailing effects in terms of net polling results, showing that campaign visits by Governor Rick Perry (R-TX) in his 2006 reelection campaign increased support for his campaign, but simultaneously increased support for the Democratic Party challenger in the polls. To date, the literature on political advertising has been the most attentive to countervailing effects. For example, Brader (2006) finds positive campaign ads on behalf of one candidate increase enthusiasm for the election among supporters of their opponent as well. Similarly, research on negative ads has identified a "backlash effect," in which negative ads both affect voters' perception of both candidates (see Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner, 2007).

Clinton or Kaine. Similarly, a Clinton visit led to more donations to the Trump campaign. Our results thus show mobilization and counter-mobilization in response to a standard aspect of US presidential election campaigns. The effects we estimate are too small to affect the outcome of the election, but show that campaign activities can indeed have multiple countervailing effects - raising new questions regarding the measurement of campaign effects more broadly.

## Data and Research Design

Our analysis of candidate visits during the 2016 fall campaign focuses on two dependent variables, measured on the day of a candidate’s visit: small campaign donations and newly registered voters. Focusing on these outcomes allows us to credibly identify the causal effects of campaign visits. Because we study outcomes that occur on discrete days throughout the election cycle, we are able to control for cross-sectional variation in donations and registrations by using fixed-effects models, in combination with dummy variables controlling for a limited number of pivotal events during the campaign season.<sup>5</sup> We identify the causal effect of campaign visits by studying over-time variation in donation and registration rates within the same zip code. More importantly, our chosen outcomes allow us to measure whether candidate visits have mixed effects: when a candidate visits, we might expect them to galvanize supporters on ‘their’ side to register or donate through voluntary political participation (Verba, Brady, and Schlozman, 1995) or in response to activities by local campaign organizations. However, since voters often rely on negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; 2018), a visit may also activate supporters on the other side. Our approach allows us to distinguish between mobilization and counter-mobilization because we can identify donations in support or opposition to a candidate, and the party affiliation of newly-registered voters.

We study campaign donations at the level of zip code-day, from July 29 to November 12.<sup>6</sup> We focus on donations at, or below, \$200, because we expect campaign events to primarily motivate small donations. We aggregate individual donations to the level of Zip Code Tabulation Areas

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<sup>5</sup>Specifically, we control for the three presidential and one vice-presidential debate, the 9/11 memorial service during which Hillary Clinton collapsed, the release of the Trump *Access Hollywood* tape, and the day Comey announced that the FBI had reopened the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s private email server.

<sup>6</sup>We begin our analysis on the first day after the end of the Democratic National Convention and include four days after the election in case donations were made in the late stages of the campaign and logged after election day. The source of our donation data is the Federal Election Commission’s 2015-2016 campaign donations report, which includes donor address, donation amount, and date of the donation. For a discussion of how the FEC records and releases information on small donations, see the Supplemental Appendix.

(ZCTAs) to construct our primary outcome of interest: the number of small donations in a ZCTA-day.<sup>7</sup> Our data includes 33,144 zip codes (ZCTAs); the time period we study captures 1.89 million unique donations of \$200 or less, to either the Trump or Clinton campaigns or their directly-affiliated organizations. Our analysis of voter registration focuses on the number of newly-registered voters per zip code, per day. Unlike donations, registration data is not uniformly available nationwide.<sup>8</sup> We therefore utilize voter lists from seven states: Colorado, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Nevada, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup> These states include more than half of the campaign stops documented in our data. The time period we study is also more limited because many states require voters to register 30 days before the election, meaning campaign visits after this date do not translate into newly-registered voters. We limit our analysis to the period July 29 to October 11, when registration periods in five of our seven states ended.<sup>10</sup> Our treatment variables are campaign stops by one of the four candidates on the Democratic or Republican ticket.<sup>11</sup> The 2016 presidential election saw 651 unique campaign visits by candidates on a major-party ticket. The Republican nominees - Donald Trump and Mike Pence - were more active than their Democratic opponents: Trump and Pence made 373 visits to Clinton and Kaine's 278. We define a zip code as treated if any part of it falls within 50 miles of a campaign visit on a given day.

In the discussion that follows, we describe our models of campaign donations, but the same specifications and identifying assumptions apply to both outcome variables. In each case, we employ linear models with zip code fixed effects, in combination with dummy variables indicating particularly crucial days in the campaign. These models leverage the rich data at our disposal by

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<sup>7</sup>Comprehensive maps of US zip codes do not exist: ZCTAs are the closest fully-mapped analogue to zip codes and are commonly used when conducting analysis of data at the level of zip codes. Most zip codes are coterminous with their corresponding ZCTA, though some ZCTAs contain multiple zip codes.

<sup>8</sup>Many states prevent researchers from accessing lists altogether (e.g., New Hampshire and Virginia), while others are prohibitively expensive (e.g., Wisconsin).

<sup>9</sup>Studying mobilization and counter-mobilization requires we know the party affiliation of newly-registered voters. This further limits us to states that collect this information: the models that measure the effect of candidate visits on all registrations include the seven states listed above, the models that measure the effect on Democratic, Independent, and Republican voter registration rely on voter lists from Colorado, Florida, North Carolina, Nevada and Pennsylvania.

<sup>10</sup>Note that recording either a voter's registration or a campaign donation may lag the actual application or submission of the donation. To the extent that time lags exist between an individual's attempt to register or donate and the actual logging of that registration or donation, it would bias our results toward a null finding. Moreover, we would expect relatively little lag in practice: many donations and registrations are now logged immediately if they were submitted online. In the case of voter registration, county clerks often back-date registration to the date of receipt or the postmark date for mailed application. We discuss the issue of lag in our outcome variables in more detail in the Supplemental Appendix.

<sup>11</sup>We discuss the source of our campaign visit data, and coding decisions in the Supplemental Appendix.

accounting for time-invariant heterogeneity across zip codes that would otherwise bias estimates of a visit’s effect. Candidates tend to visit population centers, which have more potential donors, and may choose to visit sites where they enjoy strong support. A cross-sectional model would be biased if candidates visit areas with many donors, even if they do not actually cause more donations to occur. To account for time-invariant differences between zip codes, we estimate the following linear model to measure the effect of visits on donations

$$y_{ij} = B_0 + B_1T_{ij} + B_2P_{ij} + B_3C_{ij} + B_4K_{ij} + B_{ij}\phi_{ij} + \theta + \mu_{ij}$$

where  $y_{ij}$  is a count of donations in zip code  $i$  on day  $j$ ;  $T_{ij}$ ,  $P_{ij}$ ,  $C_{ij}$ , and  $K_{ij}$  are each binary indicators representing treatment of zip code  $i$  on day  $j$  by Trump, Pence, Clinton, and Kaine, respectively;  $\phi$  represents a vector of particularly influential days in the campaign<sup>12</sup>;  $\theta$  represents a vector of zip code fixed effects; and  $\mu_{ij}$  represents the typical error term. In most models, we incorporate a vector of week fixed effects, to account for changes in the likelihood of donations over the life of the campaign season. Our outcome,  $y_{ij}$ , is, alternately, a count of donations to Trump or to Clinton.<sup>13</sup> We utilize an identical specification when studying the effect of visits on voter registration rates. By incorporating a fixed effect for each zip code, we focus on within-unit variation over time, exploiting the fact that candidate visits are temporally bounded. Our analysis assumes that visits are orthogonal to time-varying factors that differentially influence donations or registrations in treated areas. That is, we assume that time-varying factors that might influence donations or registrations in particular geographic areas – e.g., a scandal among local politicians – are not correlated with the timing of campaign visits to those same areas. Due to the large sample we analyze, we focus on substantively large effects, rather than those that merely pass the bar of statistical significance.<sup>14</sup>

## Results

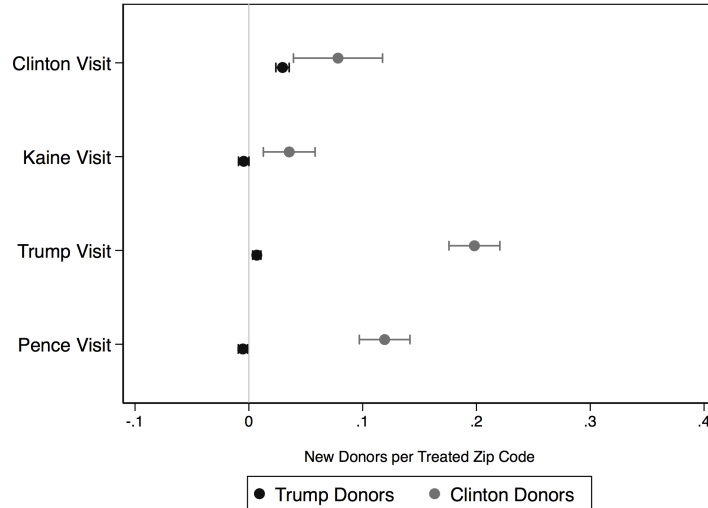
We begin by focusing on the impact of campaign visits on donations. Our outcome variable is a count of donations \$200 or less on a zip code-day basis. Our primary results regarding

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<sup>12</sup>These comprise the days of Hillary Clinton fainting; all three debates; the Trump *Access Hollywood* tape; and the James Comey Letter.

<sup>13</sup>Because our outcome variables are counts, we also report poisson models in the Supplemental Appendix.

<sup>14</sup>For instance, our donation analysis covers a sample of 3.55 million zip code-days. With such large sample sizes, even small effects can meet conventional thresholds of statistical significance.

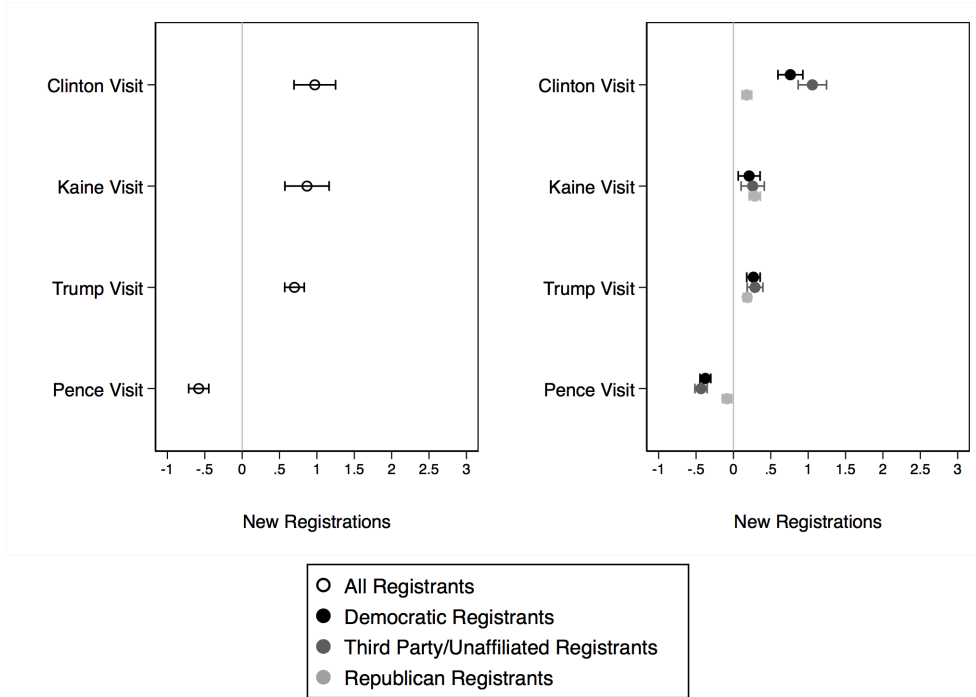


**Figure 1:** Estimated effects of campaign visits on donations to the Clinton and Trump campaigns, respectively. The unit of analysis is the zip code-day; models include zip code and week fixed effects; standard errors are clustered at the zip code level.

campaign donations are reported in Figure 1, which plots the coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals from a set of two regression models.<sup>15</sup> In the figure, we plot the estimated effect of a visit by each of the four candidates on donations to the Clinton and Trump campaigns. The results illustrate a strong counter-mobilization effect by Trump, Pence, and Clinton. The counter-mobilization effects are substantively large: in particular, Trump’s visits prompted more donations to the opposing campaign than to his own. To illustrate the magnitude of counter-mobilization, visits by Trump and Pence increased donations to the Clinton campaign by 47.7 and 35.9 percent, respectively. While Trump’s effect on Clinton donations can be explained partially by the generally higher number of donors to the Clinton campaign - Clinton received more than 10 times the number of small donations received by the Trump campaign during this period - the extent of counter-mobilization is compelling. Moreover, visits by Trump yielded more donations to the Clinton campaign than visits by either Democratic candidate.

Counter-mobilization in response to a Clinton visit is less dramatic, but still sizable. Clinton visits were more effective than Trump visits at mobilizing donations to the Republicans. Though the overall number of donations to the Trump campaign was small, a campaign stop by Clinton produced a 90.4 percent jump from this low base. At the same time, only presidential candidates mobilized their own supporters and these effects tended to be smaller – Trump mobilized 20.7

<sup>15</sup>The full results are reported in the Supplemental Appendix.



**Figure 2:** Estimated effects of campaign visits on voter registration. Left panel: overall effect at the zip code-day level, among seven states. Right panel: effect on Democrats, independents, and Republicans, in five states. The unit of analysis is the zip code-day; models include zip code and week fixed effects; standard errors are clustered by zip code.

percent more donations to his campaign, while Clinton’s campaign saw a 25.8 percent increase in donations in response to a Clinton visit. Stops by Kaine and Pence had comparatively little benefit for their respective campaigns. Our results regarding mobilization are also less consistent across alternative models than the robust evidence we find for counter-mobilization.<sup>16</sup>

In the models assessing the effect of visits on registration rates we study the change in the number of newly registered voters by zip code-day in response to a campaign visit. We report our main results in Figure 2. In the left panel, we plot the estimated effect of a campaign visit by each of the four candidates on overall new registrations per zip code. We estimate that a Clinton visit produced a 43.0 percent increase in registrations, or approximately 166 newly-registered voters per typical trip. The right panel highlights the differential mobilization of

<sup>16</sup>In the Supplemental Appendix we test the robustness of our finding to a variety of alternative definitions of treatment, including different arbitrary distance thresholds and definitions based on the boundaries of local media markets. We also use alternative definitions of “small donors,” and incorporate day fixed effects. These models consistently show strong counter-mobilization effects by Trump, Pence and Clinton campaign visits, though visits by Trump and Pence produce much larger counter-mobilization effects in general. Most models also show mobilization effects by both presidential candidates. However, these results are smaller, substantively, in the case of Trump visits and the mobilization effect – for both campaigns – is more sensitive to modeling choices.



Democratic and Republican voters by candidate visits. While the effects are less consistent than those for donations, we do observe mobilization and counter-mobilization effects. Our results suggest that a Clinton visit increased registration rates among Democrats by 64.9 percent, while simultaneously increasing rates among Republicans by 21.3 percent. As with donations, Trump's counter-mobilization effect is as large or larger than his mobilization effect: both Democratic and Republican registrations went up by approximately 19 percent in the wake of a Trump visit, producing approximately 46 new Democratic voters and 32 new Republican voters per visit.

## **Conclusion**

Our results suggest that campaign visits can, and do, influence voter behavior, even if these particular effects are minor in the grand scheme of a presidential election. More importantly, we find strong evidence that visits by the presidential candidates in the 2016 presidential election mobilized the candidates' supporters *and* opponents. Visits by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump produced increases in voter registration for both their own party and that of their opponent. Similarly, candidate visits resulted in increased donations to their own campaigns, as well as to their opponent. Notably, Trump's visits in particular made him a more effective fundraiser for the Clinton campaign than either Clinton or Kaine were themselves. To be sure, it is possible these effects are specific to the 2016 campaign. For example, if visit effects are indeed related to local campaign activity or to the level of negative partisanship, different candidates and campaign organizations may produce different levels of mobilization and counter-mobilization. Future research - looking at other candidates and races across time - can clarify whether the counter-mobilization observed here is a common response to campaign visits.

Nonetheless, these results do suggest a need to rethink the conventional wisdom regarding campaign effects and the methods used to study them. Campaign activities, such as television advertising and get-out-the-vote efforts, may not produce large, discernible changes in aggregate vote share or public opinion polls. But this finding is not necessarily evidence that voters are impervious to campaigning. As we find, it is possible voters are responding to campaign effects that counterbalance one another. This suggests that the study of campaign effects cannot rely solely on the assumption that voters respond either positively or not at all when they encounter campaign activities. Rather, we provide evidence that voters can respond in more complex ways: some voters mobilizing in favor of the candidate engaged in campaign activities, while

others counter-mobilize in favor of their opponent.

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