

Mobilization and Counter-Mobilization: The Effect of Candidate Visits on Campaign Donations in the 2016 Presidential Election

Short Title: Mobilization and Counter-Mobilization

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Political scientists studying the impact of campaign visits by presidential candidates have come to conflicting conclusions on whether campaigns 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 campaign donations in the immediate aftermath of a visit. Our results show that visits by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton inspired their supporters to donate more money than they otherwise would have. However, we also find a considerable level of counter-mobilization: visits by both Trump and Clinton resulted in an increase in donations to the opposing presidential campaign.

Keywords: presidential elections, campaign visits, campaign effects, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton.

Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online edition.

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 campaign outcomes 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.¹ 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).² 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:

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

²Note 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.³ We estimate the extent to which visits by Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and their running mates, activated voters on both sides using campaign donations as a metric of a visit's possible influence. While fundraising may not be the core aim of a candidate visit⁴ - and the actual effects in terms of the number of donations and the amount of money raised are minimal - this metric allows 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.⁵ We find that campaign visits by Trump and Clinton spurred additional donations. But our results suggest that visits by presidential candidates also increased donations among members of the *opposite* party. We find a particularly strong counter-mobilization effect for visits by Donald Trump: a visit by Trump not only resulted in an increase in donations to the Clinton campaign, it produced more donations to his opponent than to his own campaign. Our results thus show mobilization and counter-mobilization in response to a standard aspect of US presidential election campaigns. To be sure, the effects we estimate are too small to affect the outcome of the election, but they

³The term 'mobilization' generally is used to refer to voting. In this paper we exclusively look at whether campaign visits activate people to donate on the day of the visit. We make no claims here regarding the effect of campaign visits on voting behavior.

⁴For a discussion of the varied potential goals of visits in presidential election campaigns, see Wood (2016).

⁵Shaw 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).

Table 1: Campaign Visits by Candidate in the 2016 Presidential Election

	Donald Trump	Mike Pence	Hillary Clinton	Tim Kaine	Total
<i>Swing States</i>					
Public Visits	158	137	88	103	486
Fundraisers	17	6	5	11	39
<i>Other States</i>					
Public Visits	18	16	9	12	55
Fundraisers	14	7	19	31	71
Total	207	166	121	157	651

do 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 measures of campaign donations - the total amount of money donated, and the total number of donations - measured on the day of a candidate’s visit. 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 by using fixed-effects models. We identify the causal effect of campaign visits by studying over-time variation in donation rates within the same zip code of a visited designated market area (DMA, or media market). More importantly, our chosen outcome allows us to measure whether candidate visits have mixed effects: when a candidate visits, we might expect them to galvanize supporters on ‘their’ side to 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 of or opposition to a candidate.

We study campaign donations at the level of zip code-day, from July 29 to November 12.⁶ We aggregate individual donations to the level of Zip Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs) to construct

⁶We 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.

our primary outcome of interest: the dollars or number of donations received in a ZCTA-day.⁷ Our full data set includes 33,144 zip codes (ZCTAs); the time period we study captures 2,253,482 million unique donations, to either the Trump or Clinton campaigns or their directly-affiliated organizations.⁸

Our treatment variables are public, non-fundraising, campaign stops by one of the four candidates on the Democratic or Republican ticket in swing states.⁹ The 2016 presidential election saw 651 unique campaign visits by candidates on a major-party ticket nationally (see Table 1). While there is some variation in geographic spread of these visits across the two campaigns (see Figures 1 and 2), the large majority of candidate visits for both tickets took place in swing states. Notably, the Republican nominees were more active in their campaign visits: Donald Trump and Mike Pence made 295 public visits in swing states, while Clinton and Kaine made only 191. We define a ZCTA as treated if it falls in a designated market area (DMA, or media market) that included a campaign visit on a given day.¹⁰

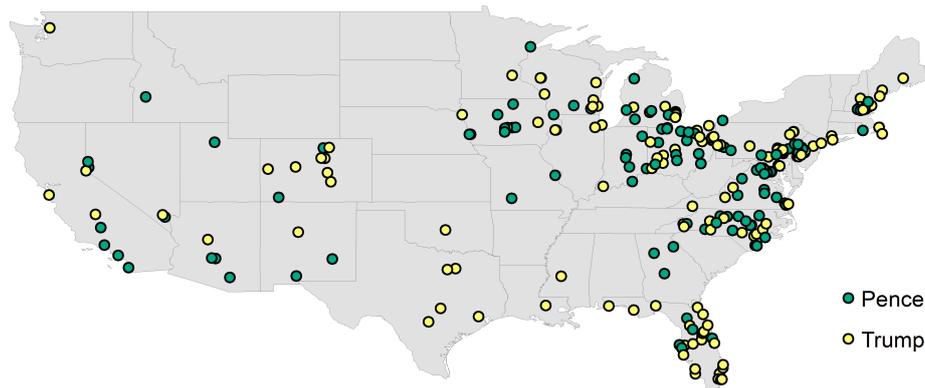


Figure 1: Campaign visits by Donald Trump and Mike Pence during the fall 2016 presidential campaign.

⁷Comprehensive 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.

⁸In a separate analysis we also assessed whether visits had an effect on voter registration rates. We found no significant effects in this regard. Due to space limitations we do not present the results in this paper, but we do discuss our data, model, and findings in detail in the supplemental appendix.

⁹We define 2016 swing states as those in which the margin of victory for either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney in 2012 was within 10 points - specifically, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin. We exclude public visits that occurred on the same day and in the same ZCTA as private fundraisers since this would bias the results in our favor. We discuss the source of our campaign visit data, and coding decisions in the Supplemental Appendix.

¹⁰In the supplemental appendix we also present models in which we define treatment on the basis of distance from the visit - counting as treated ZCTAs in a 50 and 20 mile radius from the visited ZCTA. These models show mobilization effects for Clinton, Kaine, and Trump visits, and countermobilization effects for Trump and Pence visits.

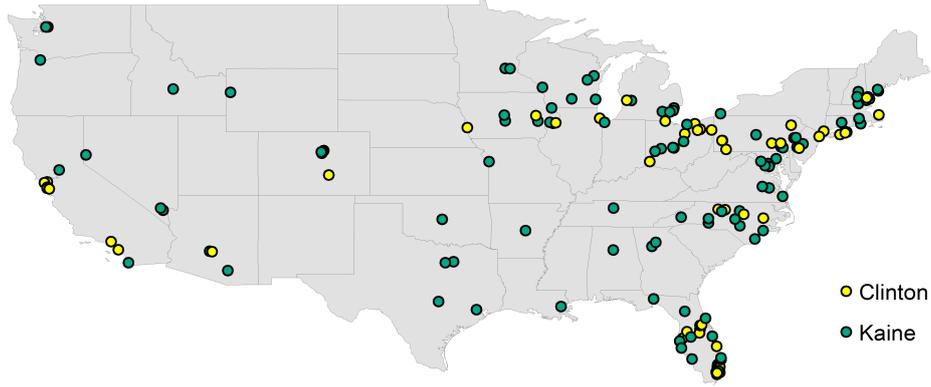


Figure 2: Campaign visits by Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine during the fall 2016 presidential campaign.

We employ a linear model with day and zip code fixed effects. This model leverages the rich data at our disposal by 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

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

where y_{ij} is the amount in donations / the number 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; ϕ represents a vector of day fixed effects; θ represents a vector of zip code fixed effects; and μ_{ij} represents the typical error term. Our outcome represents donations to either Clinton or Trump on the day of the visit, depending on the model. 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 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.

Results

Our outcome variable is the total value or number of donations received on a zip code-day basis on the day of the campaign visit. Our primary results regarding campaign donations are reported in Figure 3, which plots the coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals from a set of four regression models.¹¹ 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, respectively.

The results illustrate mobilization and counter-mobilization effects for both presidential candidates. Most notably, Trump's visits prompted a considerable increase in the total amount donated and the number of donations to the Clinton campaign (both significant at the 0.01 level). Most notably, our estimates suggest Trump visits benefited Clinton's campaign more than his own by a factor of more than two, based on the point estimates. To illustrate the magnitude of counter-mobilization, visits by Trump increased the total dollars donated to the Clinton campaign by 7 percent, or about \$3,388 in additional donations for a single day in a treated media market. Similarly, Clinton visits also had a counter-mobilizing effect as they resulted in an increase in the number of donations to the Trump campaign (significant at the 0.05 level).¹²

Both presidential candidates also mobilized their own supporters: a visit by Trump mobilized 5.5 percent more in total dollars donated per zip code-day to his campaign and was correlated with an increase in the number of donors as well, while Clinton's campaign saw a 16.2 percent increase in total dollars - or about \$9,613 - donated per zip code-day in response to a Clinton visit. In terms of actual dollars donated, both mobilization and counter-mobilization had larger effects on Clinton donations. This could be in part because Clinton received many more donations than the Trump campaign in the first place and, therefore, started from a higher baseline.¹³ Our results do not change if we focus exclusively on small donors, implying that candidate visits mobilize donations from a broad range of individuals, rather than simply a few large donors. Stops by Kaine appear to have had a positive effect on Clinton donations, but no effect on donations to the Trump campaign, while Pence visits had no consistent effect on

¹¹The full results are reported in the Supplemental Appendix.

¹²While the effect is significant, substantively it is negligible since Trump - on average - only received 12.2 donations per DMA per day. A Clinton visit adds only one additional donation to the Trump campaign.

¹³For instance, Trump's 5.5 percent gain in donations in the wake of his own visits corresponds to just \$512 additional dollars. For a full breakdown of the substantive effects, see the Supplemental Appendix.

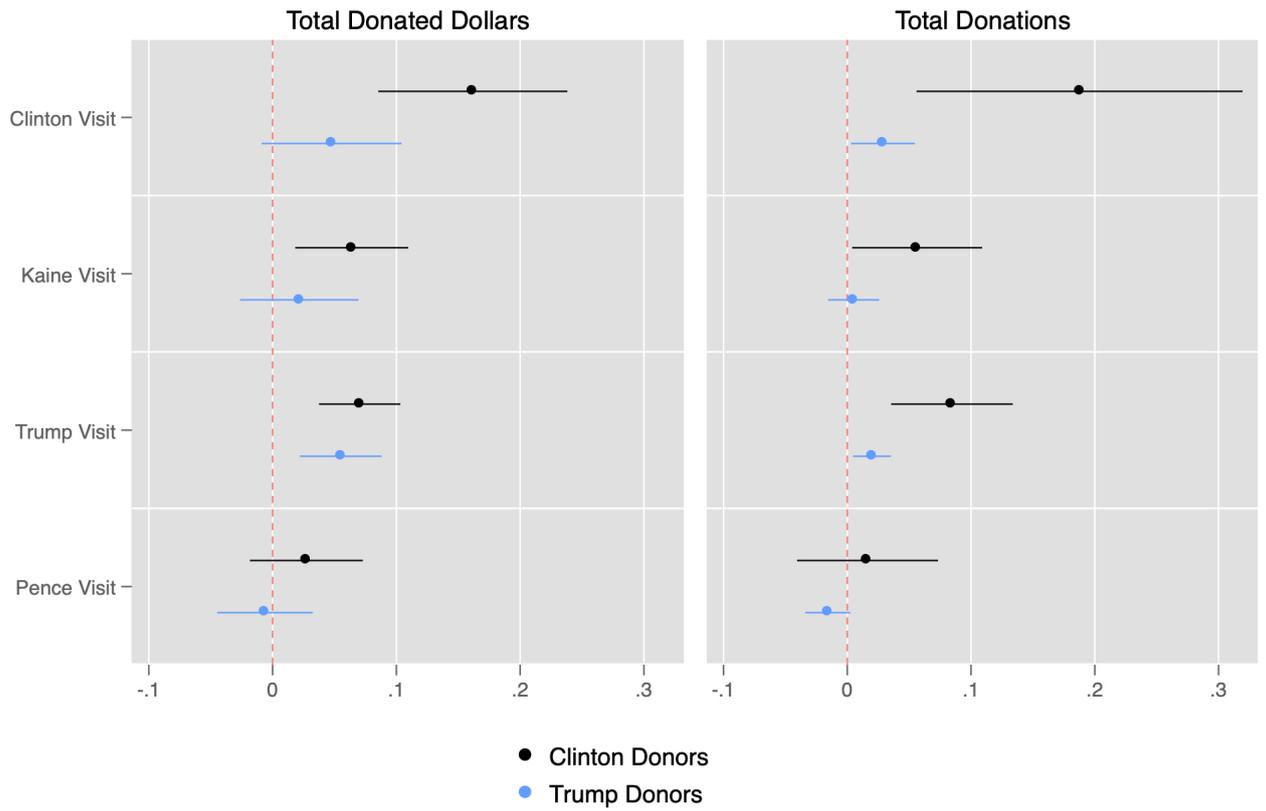


Figure 3: Estimated effects of campaign visits in swing states on the natural log of donations to the Clinton and Trump campaigns, respectively, on the day of the visit. The unit of analysis is the zip code-day; models include zip code and day fixed effects; standard errors are clustered at the DMA level.

either campaign.¹⁴

Conclusion

Our results suggest that campaign visits 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 presidential candidates in the 2016 presidential election mobilized the candidates' supporters *and* opponents. Visits by Clinton and Trump produced increases in donations to their own campaigns. However, visits by both candidates also resulted in increases in donations to their opponents. Notably, Trump's visits had a bigger positive effect on the amount donated to his opponent than to his own campaign.

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. To the extent that these results generalize to other races, they have clear implications for how campaigns think about strategy and voter outreach.

Methodologically, these results also 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 mobilize in favor of the candidate engaged in campaign activities, while others counter-mobilize in favor of their opponent.

¹⁴In the Supplemental Appendix, we test the robustness of our findings to a variety of alternative definitions of treatment, including using all visits nationally, as well as arbitrary distance thresholds instead of media markets, caps on the size of donations included in our outcome variable, and the exclusion of regular visits that coincide with fundraisers in the same area. These models consistently show strong counter-mobilization effects by Trump campaign visits, and mobilization effects by Trump and Clinton visits.

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