

The Ground Game in the 2012 Presidential Election

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Relatively little research has examined the effects of campaign-led field activity in a competitive election. In this article, we leverage a unique data set containing the location of every Barack Obama and Mitt Romney field office and county-level data on the presidential vote to understand how communication with voters in the field may have affected the outcome of the 2012 presidential election. We find that the presence of Obama field offices was associated with greater Obama vote share at the county level, although we cannot detect a similar relationship for Romney field offices. We conduct additional robustness tests to address the potential limitations of these observational data. Ultimately, we conclude that even if Obama's field organization out-performed Romney's, the aggregate impact of Obama's field organization was not large enough to determine the outcome of the 2012 presidential election.

Keywords campaign, election, field organization, ground game

American political campaigns are devoting increasing effort to field activity that can contact, persuade, and mobilize voters. But scholars know relatively little about the impact of field activity by political candidates and parties, in part because many studies of field organizing focus on nonpartisan get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts (e.g., Gerber & Green, 2000). These studies often show that field activity can mobilize voters, but often do not compare the simultaneous efforts of opposing campaigns to assess the overall impact of field activity on election outcomes.

The few existing studies of partisan field activity paint a qualified picture about its impact. Two studies suggest that presidential campaign field activity can increase vote share: Masket's (2009) study of Barack Obama and John McCain field offices in battleground states in the 2008 election, and Darr and Levendusky's (2014) study of Democratic field offices in the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections. But each of these studies finds a modest effect—one small enough to account for the margin of victory in just a few battleground states. A third study (Enos & Fowler, 2014) finds that field activity by the Obama and Romney campaigns was associated with increased voter turnout. Enos and Fowler do not directly examine vote share, but their findings imply that there was little impact on vote share because Obama's and Romney's efforts had symmetrical effects on the turnout of their co-partisans.

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We therefore focus on the unexplored question of whether, in the 2012 presidential elections, field activity by the Barack Obama and Mitt Romney campaigns, operating simultaneously, appeared to affect actual vote share and, thus, who won the election. This question is made all the more pertinent by claims that Obama's 2012 field organization was "a ground game on steroids" (Payne, 2012) and was crucial for his reelection. Using survey data, we find that living in a county with field offices was associated with self-reported contact from a political campaign, particularly contact in the modes most commonly used by field organizations (in-person and phone). Using election returns, we also find that the presence of Obama campaign offices in a given county in 2012 was associated with greater Obama vote share in that county; the association of Romney's field offices with his vote share was weaker. Given the challenges of using observational data to estimate the apparent impact of field activity, we undertake several auxiliary analyses that shore up confidence in our main findings. For example, we find no evidence that past party strength in a county predicts field office placement in the future. Ultimately, we perform simulations that suggest that any votes credited to Obama's field operation were pivotal only in Florida, and that, all else equal, Obama probably would have won the 2012 election even without the efforts of his campaign's field operation.

Our findings provide some common ground in the broader debate about the impact of political campaigns on voters. On the one hand, we find that field organizing did favor Obama in 2012. Although both parties invested in field organizing in this election, their respective effects did not appear to "cancel out." On the other hand, our evidence does not support strong claims about the pivotal nature of field operations in the 2012 presidential election.

What Can the Ground Game Do?

Presidential campaign effects are difficult to identify in a real-life campaign environment (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, 2000; Finkel, 1993; Hillygus & Shields, 2009; Holbrook, 1996; Johnston, Hagen, & Jamieson, 2004; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Shaw, 2006; Sides & Vavreck, 2013). While laboratory studies demonstrate that advertisements, photographs, endorsements, and so on may influence people's evaluation of the candidates, their vote choice, and their likelihood of voting, such effects have often proven small and ephemeral, when they can be detected at all, in an actual presidential election.

Part of the challenge is that campaign stimuli rarely exist in isolation. Activity by one candidate is usually countered by activity from his or her opponent. Unlike randomized trials in medicine, where the average treatment effect from the lab is generalized to the population in a relatively uncomplicated way, a campaign treatment may generate large effects in the lab or the field but produce no net effect within the strategic environment of a campaign. This is because each side negates the other's effects. What would we conclude about whether aspirin reduced pain in the real world, despite its notable effects in the lab, if every time someone took an aspirin outside the lab one of aspirin's competitors gave them a painful thump on the head? Treatments are likely to be more effective when they are isolated from strategic interference.¹

Campaign effects thus emerge more clearly when the campaign is lopsided and one side cannot fully counteract the other's efforts. The resulting imbalances, and their variation over time during a campaign, can help isolate campaign effects using observational data from real campaigns. In congressional elections and presidential primaries—which frequently feature well-funded candidates running against poorly funded ones—campaign

activity often shifts candidate preferences and affects election outcomes (Bartels, 1988; Jacobson, 2004; Sides & Vavreck, 2013). In presidential general elections, however, it is harder for either candidate to get a large and durable advantage in campaign activity. But when those advantages arise, campaign activity, such as advertising (Franz & Ridout, 2010; Hill, Lo, Vavreck, & Zaller, 2013; Johnston et al., 2004; Sides & Vavreck, 2013), can matter, although the effects may be short-lived (Gerber, Gimpel, Green, & Shaw, 2011; Hill et al., 2013) and not large enough to change the outcome.

Although there have been many studies of campaign advertising and campaign spending generally, there have been fewer studies of the ground game. Yet there is reason to believe that the ground game, and thus field organization, can matter. The activities undertaken by field organizations fall into two general categories: persuasion and mobilization (including both voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts). At the presidential level, campaign field organizations generally use both phone and in-person communication to persuade and/or mobilize targeted voters. The information conveyed to voters in these interactions is often tailored specifically to mobilize or persuade them. In early 2012, for example, the Obama campaign conducted a large-scale field experiment that tested whether a phone call from a field organizer would persuade voters (see Sides & Vavreck, 2014). They found that it increased the intention to vote for Obama by four points. Similar experiments undergird efforts to mobilize voters. For example, asking voters to make a mental plan of how they will vote—when they will vote, how they will get to the polling place, etc.—increases turnout (Nickerson & Rogers, 2010). Field staff are the people who have those conversations with voters. For these reasons, it is not surprising that campaigning appears to boost turnout and/or vote share in studies involving field experiments (Gerber & Green, 2000) and aggregate data (e.g., McGhee & Sides, 2011; Osborn, McClurg, & Knoll, 2010).

That said, we know relatively little about the consequences of the field activity of partisan campaigns working in real time. One exception is Middleton and Green's (2008) study of MoveOn.org's field operation in the 2004 presidential election, which they find boosted turnout. Two more recent analyses, Masket's (2009) study of the Obama and McCain campaigns in 2008 and Darr and Levendusky's (2014) study of the John Kerry and Obama campaigns in 2004–2012, find that field offices are associated with increased turnout and increased vote share at the county level, after accounting for other factors. For example, Masket estimates that the presence of an Obama field office in a county that did not have a McCain field office was associated with a 0.6-point increase in the Democratic share of the vote. He further estimates that in three states—Florida, Indiana, and North Carolina—Obama would have lost if the number of voters activated by the campaign had either voted for John McCain or simply not voted. The study found no statistically significant relationship between the presence of McCain's offices and vote share.

The question for us is whether similar relationships were apparent in the 2012 presidential election. Although presidential elections often feature two evenly matched campaigns, Obama and Romney field operations may not have been as evenly matched. At least in recent presidential elections, Democrats have invested more resources into field organizing than Republicans have, drawing explicitly on the lessons of field experiments (see Issenberg, 2012). This imbalance may help us to identify the effects of field operations in 2012.

The Geography of Field Offices in 2012

In 2012, the Obama campaign established nearly 800 field offices across the country, including at least one in each of the 50 states. The Romney campaign largely copied the

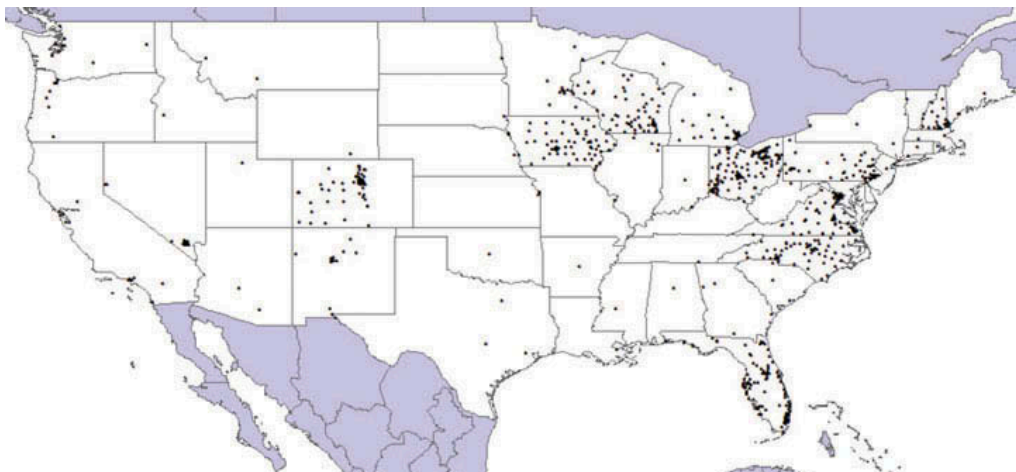


Figure 1. Location of Obama campaign field offices in 2012.

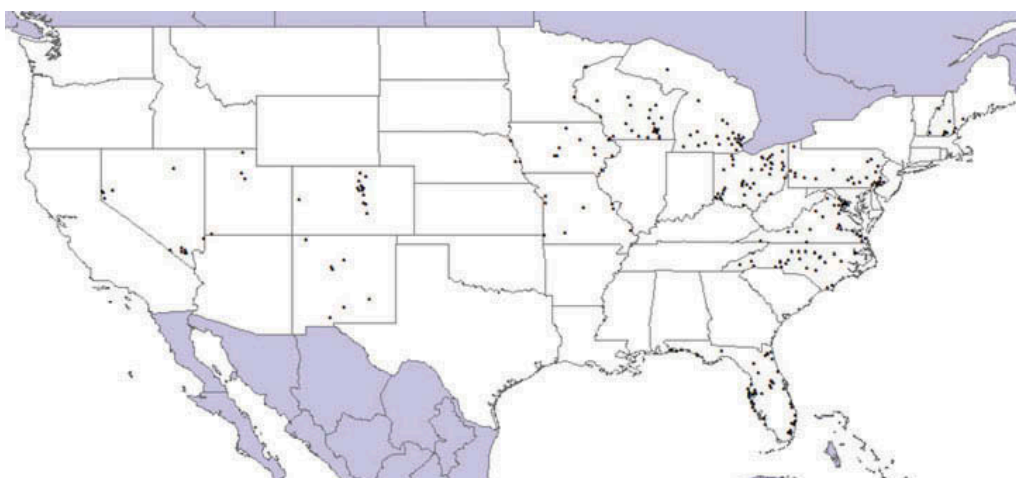


Figure 2. Location of Romney campaign field offices in 2012.

field office deployment patterns of the McCain campaign from four years earlier, despite a widespread belief that the McCain campaign had been out-organized at the ground level. [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) map the locations of campaign field offices in the contiguous United States, based on what was listed on each campaign's official website during the last two days of the 2012 presidential election.

At any level of aggregation—nationally, statewide, or countywide—the distribution of offices favored Obama. Obama established 786 field offices in 449 counties; Romney established 284 field offices in 218 counties. At the state level, Obama's field offices outnumbered Romney's in every state except Utah and Missouri. At the county level, of the 218 counties with a Romney field office, only 31 (14%) of those counties lacked an Obama office. Conversely, of the 449 counties with an Obama field office, 262 (58%) had no Romney office. And in the counties where both campaigns established field offices, Obama had more. In the counties with at least one Obama field office, the Obama campaign established multiple field offices in roughly one-quarter of them. But the vast majority of counties targeted by the Romney campaign contained only one Romney field office, and the Romney campaign never placed more than five field offices in any one county. [Figure 3](#),

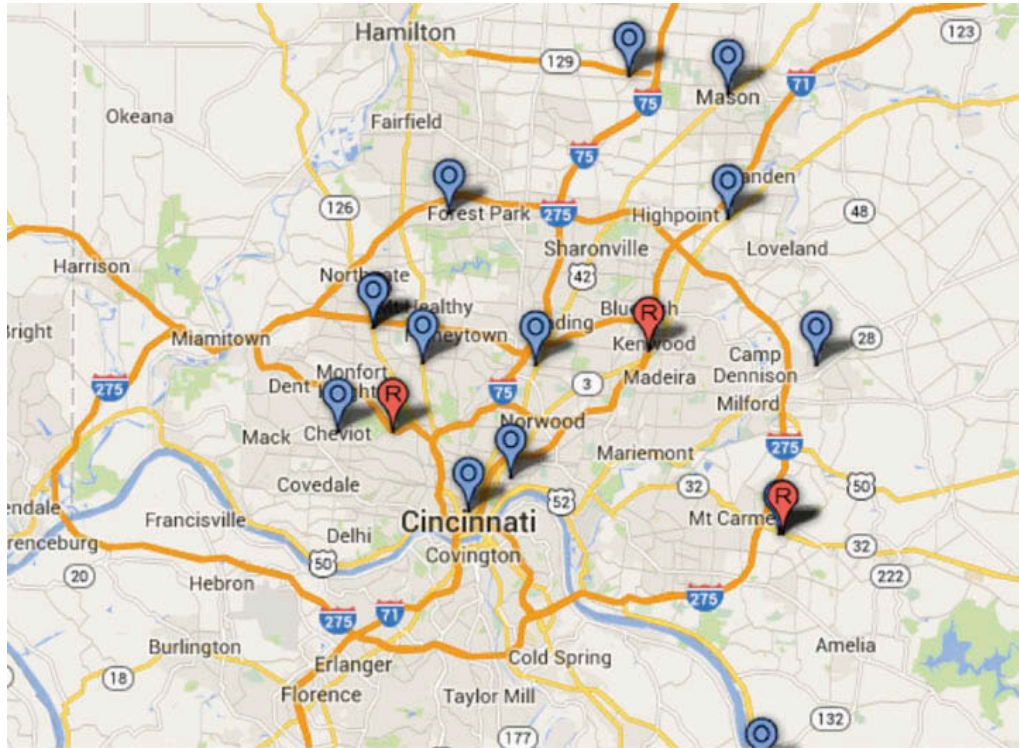


Figure 3. Location of Obama and Romney field offices in Hamilton County, Ohio.

for example, shows a map of Hamilton County, Ohio, which is home to Cincinnati and was one of the more hotly contested regions in one of the most hotly contested states in the country. The map shows the preponderance of Obama field offices in the region.

These patterns beg two further questions. First, what determined where the two campaigns established field offices? Second, why did the Obama campaign have such a large advantage in the number of offices? The answers to these questions can shed light on decisions about the location of offices and thus their potential effects.

The Romney Campaign

That the Romney campaign mounted a field operation substantially smaller than Obama's may seem surprising. After the 2008 race, many observers argued that the Republicans did not take the Obama ground game seriously enough (Ball, 2012). One explanation for McCain's strategy was that he lacked the funds, given how much he was out-spent by Obama. As then-U.S. Representative Scott McInnis (R-Colorado) remarked in 2008, "If you have the money, you can duplicate the model [Obama's] got" (Sherry, 2008, p. A-7). But in 2012, the Romney campaign and its allies had plenty of money (NYT staff, 2012). Why did his campaign not more aggressively invest in field offices?

The Romney campaign did not run its own field operation, delegating that responsibility to the Republican National Committee (RNC). In fall 2012, Rick Wiley, the RNC's political director, said, "The Romney campaign doesn't do the ground game. They have essentially ceded that responsibility to the RNC. They understand this is our role" (Ball, 2012). Thus the Romney campaign's ground game piggybacked on existing state party

infrastructure. Within the battleground states, Romney field offices were set up in established state party offices, which were working not only to mobilize voters for Romney but also other Republican candidates in down-ballot races.² Darr and Levendusky (2014) find that these offices were in a mixture of heavily Republican counties and “swing” counties with a close partisan balance. Thus, the smaller number and location of field offices may reflect what resources the Republican Party already had and not explicit decisions by the Romney campaign based on current data from the 2012 race.

Why would the Romney campaign not develop its own field operation? One answer may have to do with its beliefs about the value of field activity. In an interview with Romney campaign Director of Data Science Alex Lundry, he said that the Romney campaign was focused as much, if not more, on persuasion of swing voters than on mobilization of supporters. That is, they did not believe that “turning out the base” was enough to win, and thus they needed to convince some undecided voters to support Romney. Although field offices can be used for both persuasion and mobilization, the Romney campaign may have believed that they were best suited for mobilization.

Another answer is time. Like many incumbent presidents, Obama did not face a competitive primary election and had years to devote to building a general election campaign machine—constructing databases, recruiting staff and volunteers, and so on. Meanwhile, Romney had to win a competitive primary and could pivot fully to the general election campaign only in April 2012, when the last of his primary rivals dropped out. Lundry cited this factor and noted that this was a significant advantage that incumbent presidents have. Thus, it may have made strategic sense for the Romney campaign to draw on the preexisting organizational capacity of the RNC.

In sum, the Romney campaign largely outsourced its field organization to the Republican Party, whose field offices were located in a mix of swing counties and base counties. This suggests that to estimate the association of Romney field offices with vote share, we would need to control for the partisan balance of a county, in order to capture the information that would indicate its swing or base status.

The Obama Campaign

By contrast, the Obama campaign controlled its own field operation—as it did in 2008 (Issenberg, 2012)—and made explicit decisions about where to allocate field resources. In an interview we conducted with Jeremy Bird, the National Field Director of Obama for America, he said that within battleground states, the allocation of field resources was a function of four main factors.³ First was the number of voters who were unregistered but believed to be likely Obama supporters. Second was the number of voters targeted for purposes of turnout—voters who would largely be Democrats or believed to support Obama already. Third was the number of voters targeted for persuasion—voters who were predicted to be uncommitted to either candidate but were also determined to be receptive to new political information. Both sets of targeted voters were identified via models developed within the campaign. Dan Wagner, the Chief Analytics Officer for the Obama campaign, described to us that these models were composed of data available in the voter file, including party registration or voting in party primaries, age, race, and the like (although the available data varied across states). Fourth were logistical factors unrelated to the campaign’s targets, which reflected decisions made by local Obama staff. Bird said that the national campaign made recommendations about locating field resources to the Obama staff in each state. However, the staff’s decisions were based not only on those recommendations but on “the art” of locating resources. Bird gave the following hypothetical example, speaking as if he

were a staff person in Ohio: “We’ve got to have one [a field office] in Lima because it’s, like, too far to drive to . . .” (Lima, Ohio, is about halfway between Dayton and Toledo and about the same distance from Columbus.)

For the Obama campaign, the relative importance of registration, mobilization, and persuasion varied across states and even within states. For example, in Ohio, Bird said that the Obama campaign devoted significant resources to the Cleveland area even though they knew they were likely to win the city and the surrounding Cuyahoga County without doing anything at all. They did this because there were many unregistered Democrats in Cleveland, and so registering and mobilizing these people would increase their vote total in the state.⁴ More difficult, Bird explained, was a state like New Hampshire, which allows voters to register as “undeclared” and to change their registration status at the polling location. In this state, more emphasis was placed on persuasion, because it was harder for the Obama campaign to identify known partisans who simply needed to be mobilized.

How do the strategic decisions of the Obama campaign affect our ability to make inferences about the association between field offices and vote share? The Obama campaign had reasons for locating field offices where they did, but these reasons did not rely on an explicit estimation that areas were trending in Obama’s favor. While the Obama campaign certainly did invest in counties with large numbers of Democratic voters, as the Cleveland example suggests and as Darr and Levendusky (2014) confirm, they also allocated resources to areas that were not Democratic strongholds but contained large numbers of voters who were not strongly committed to either candidate and, in the Obama campaign’s estimation, persuadable. More importantly, in modeling voters to mobilize or persuade, the Obama campaign relied on information in the voter file that we are able to capture in our analysis of county-level data—such as partisanship, race, and age.

To be sure, these data on field offices come with limitations. For example, we cannot measure the effectiveness of any single office and must assume, in essence, that they were all equally effective. But at the same time, based on our conversations with campaign principals and other studies, we are able to control for the factors that influenced decisions about where to locate offices. This in turn helps to ensure that any association between field offices and vote share is not spurious. Later, we detail auxiliary analyses that lend support to our conclusions about this association.

The Relationship Between Field Offices and Contact by the Campaign

Any positive relationship between field organization and vote share is predicated on the idea that field organizations win votes via contact with voters—particularly via in-person contact and phone calls, which are the modes most commonly employed by field staff and volunteers. Darr and Levendusky (2014) show that in 2008 living in a county with field offices was associated with greater self-reported contact from a campaign.⁵ This relationship was the strongest for in-person contact, less strong but still statistically significant for contact via phone calls and letters, and not statistically significant for contact via e-mail.

We undertook a similar analysis for 2012. The 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2013) asked respondents, “Did a candidate or political campaign organization contact you during the 2012 election?” Respondents who reported being contacted were then asked how they had been contacted—in person, via a phone call, via an e-mail or text message, and/or via a letter or postcard. Of course, these measures are imperfect in at least two ways. For one, respondents may not be able to recall correctly whether and how they were contacted. Second, the question refers to any candidate or campaign, not merely to the Obama and Romney campaigns. That said, we

expect that the field activity associated with the presidential campaign was, by virtue of the campaign's magnitude and intensity, the field activity most likely to reach voters.

We modeled campaign contact as a function of whether respondents lived in a county with no offices, either Obama or Romney field offices, or both Obama and Romney field offices. Similar to Darr and Levendusky's model, our model also takes into account whether the respondent lived in a battleground state as well as demographic characteristics that could be associated with the likelihood of being contacted (such as whether the respondent was a registered voter). The results of these models are presented in [Table 1](#).

In the model of any kind of contact, respondents who lived in counties with field offices were more likely to report being contacted, relative to those who lived in counties with no field offices. The apparent effect for those living in counties with both Obama and Romney field offices ($b = 0.37$) is larger than the effect for those living in counties with either Obama or Romney field offices ($b = 0.13$)—as we would expect given that the counties where both campaigns had field offices were the most hotly contested. Expressed in terms of predicted probabilities, those living in a county with both campaigns' field offices were 6.7 points more likely to report contact from a campaign than those living in counties with no field offices. Those living in counties with either type of field office were 2.5 points more likely to report contact. These relationships are net of the apparent impact of living in a battleground state and the impact of demographic factors, many of which are associated with contact in predictable ways (e.g., registered voters are more likely to report contact).⁶

However, the relationship between field offices and campaign contact depends on mode. As Darr and Levendusky (2014) found in 2008, living in a county with field offices in 2012 was more strongly related to contact in person or via phone than to contact via e-mails, text messages, letters, or postcards. For example, compared to those who lived in a county with no field offices, those who lived in a county with both Obama and Romney field offices were 4.8 points more likely to report an in-person contact and 3.3 points more likely to report receiving a phone call, but very slightly less likely to report receiving an e-mail or text and 2.7 points more likely to report receiving a letter or postcard. Thus, living in a county with field offices, particularly a county with both Obama and Romney offices, appeared to increase the probability of being contacted by a campaign, especially via the modes commonly used by field organizations.

The Relationship Between Field Offices and Vote Share

Was the presence of a candidate's campaign field office in a county associated with greater vote share for that candidate in that county? We modeled Obama's two-party vote share at the county level as a function of the presence of only an Obama field office, only a Romney field office, or both campaigns' offices.⁷ To account for features of a county that might be associated with vote share as well as the decision to locate an office there, the model includes Obama's share of the two-party vote from 2008 as well as a set of demographic variables: county population and recent population growth; the percentages of the county that are Black or Latino, under 18, have a college degree, or lack a high school degree; the median income in the county; and the change in unemployment in the year prior to the election.⁸ In addition, the model includes fixed effects for state, which help capture such things as other statewide campaign activity or a down-ballot statewide race that might affect the presidential race as well. The standard errors are clustered by state to account for the potential non-independence of the observations (counties) within each state. This combination of fixed effects and clustered standard errors makes for a conservative test of

Table 1
Models of contact by a political campaign in 2012

	Any contact	In person	Phone call	E-mail or text	Letter or postcard
Either Obama or Romney offices	0.13 [0.06]	0.06 [0.09]	0.12 [0.08]	0.09 [0.06]	0.03 [0.07]
Both Obama and Romney offices	0.37 [0.08]	0.26 [0.08]	0.25 [0.08]	-0.01 [0.06]	0.12 [0.07]
Battleground state	0.46 [0.07]	0.20 [0.08]	0.41 [0.08]	0.15 [0.06]	0.26 [0.07]
Registered voter	0.96 [0.08]	0.30 [0.17]	0.38 [0.14]	0.38 [0.12]	0.35 [0.12]
Voted in 2008	0.41 [0.06]	0.07 [0.11]	0.09 [0.10]	0.13 [0.08]	0.48 [0.09]
Age in years	0.03 [0.00]	-0.01 [0.00]	0.02 [0.00]	0.01 [0.00]	0.01 [0.00]
Female	0.05 [0.04]	-0.09 [0.05]	0.13 [0.05]	-0.21 [0.04]	-0.07 [0.04]
Black	-0.33 [0.07]	-0.06 [0.09]	-0.62 [0.09]	0.18 [0.08]	-0.61 [0.08]
Hispanic	-0.46 [0.07]	-0.03 [0.14]	-0.27 [0.11]	-0.34 [0.10]	-0.36 [0.11]
Asian	-0.84 [0.17]	0.03 [0.22]	-0.43 [0.21]	-0.19 [0.18]	-0.05 [0.17]
Other race	0.14 [0.09]	-0.05 [0.11]	-0.16 [0.11]	0.41 [0.10]	0.10 [0.10]
Currently union household	0.30 [0.07]	0.06 [0.08]	0.001 [0.08]	0.16 [0.07]	0.06 [0.07]
Formerly union household	0.38 [0.06]	0.06 [0.05]	0.09 [0.07]	0.28 [0.05]	0.19 [0.05]
Self or family members in military	0.01 [0.07]	0.04 [0.08]	-0.11 [0.08]	0.07 [0.07]	0.01 [0.06]
Own home	0.22 [0.05]	0.13 [0.06]	0.56 [0.06]	-0.38 [0.05]	0.15 [0.05]
Born again	0.06 [0.04]	-0.07 [0.05]	0.09 [0.06]	-0.08 [0.04]	0.03 [0.05]
[Dummy variables for education, income, and marital status not shown]					
Constant	-3.17 [0.18]	-1.36 [0.29]	-0.45 [0.25]	-1.86 [0.22]	-1.8 [0.24]
Observations	43,767	30,895	30,895	30,895	30,895

Notes. Cell entries are logit coefficients, with standard errors clustered by state in brackets. The dependent variable is self-reported contact by a political campaign. *Source:* 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2013). The battleground states are CO, FL, IA, NV, NH, NC, OH, VA, and WI.

the association between field offices and vote share. The results are presented in the first column of [Table 2](#).

The presence of at least one Obama field office in counties with no Romney field office was associated with a .29-point increase in the Democratic vote share ($SE = .17$). Meanwhile, in counties where only Romney had at least one office, the coefficient is in the expected direction, but the standard error is larger relative to the coefficient. The interpretation of the interaction term—signifying counties where both candidates had at least one field office—is twofold. The positive sign on this coefficient suggests that Obama’s field offices had a stronger relationship to vote share in counties where both candidates had field offices than in counties where only Obama had an office. By contrast, the interaction term suggests that Romney’s field offices had a weaker relationship to vote share in these contested counties than in those few counties where only he had an office. However, the large standard error on the interaction term renders these interpretations tentative at best.

Multiple Offices

Is it possible that the relationship between field offices and vote share was cumulative? That is, was the presence of two offices in a county associated with an increase in vote share that was twice as large as when one office was present? [Figure 4](#) displays a histogram of the number of counties with various numbers of Obama or Romney offices, including only those counties that had at least one office. This demonstrates that it was rare for either campaign to place more than one or two offices in a county. Of the 218 counties in which Romney field offices were located, 93% had only one or two offices. The Obama campaign’s larger field operation meant that it had multiple field offices in more counties, but again, this was rare. Of the 449 counties in which the Obama field operation had at least one office, 87% had only one or two offices.

We investigated the relationship between vote share and each additional field office and found some evidence of diminishing returns—although any inferences about large numbers of offices are necessarily tenuous, since so few counties had multiple offices. Thus, we rely on a collapsed version of the total number of offices—denoting zero, one, or two or more offices.⁹ The results of models with these measures are presented in the second column of [Table 2](#).

Each additional Obama field office up to two or more offices was associated with an additional 0.32 points of vote share ($SE = .16$). Each additional Romney field office was associated with a -0.13 drop in Obama’s vote share, but the standard error is much larger relative to the coefficient ($SE = .15$). These results parallel those in the first model in [Table 2](#): Obama’s field offices were associated with greater Obama vote share, but we have less confidence that Romney’s field offices were associated with greater Romney vote share.¹⁰

The Balance of Offices

Another way to conceptualize the influence of field offices involves the relative balance of Obama and Romney field offices, collapsed in this same fashion (zero, one, or two or more). We created a new variable by subtracting the number of Romney offices in a county from the number of Obama offices in the county. This analysis essentially captures the importance of the Obama ground game *advantage*. We included a control for counties that saw no ground game activity at all to distinguish these counties from counties that had the same number of Obama and Romney offices (since both groups of counties would have a

Table 2
Models of Obama's county-level share of the two-party vote in 2012

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Obama field office only	0.290 [0.169]		
Romney field office only	-0.203 [0.391]		
Obama office and Romney office	0.219 [0.368]		
Number of Obama offices (0, 1, 2+)		0.324 [0.157]	
Number of Romney offices (0, 1, 2+)		-0.133 [0.155]	
Obama offices minus Romney offices			0.226 [0.139]
Neither Romney nor Obama office			-0.105 [0.190]
Obama vote share in 2008	0.981 [0.014]	0.981 [0.014]	0.981 [0.014]
Percentage African-American	0.097 [0.013]	0.097 [0.013]	0.098 [0.013]
Percentage Latino	0.083 [0.015]	0.083 [0.015]	0.083 [0.015]
Percentage under 18	0.066 [0.025]	0.066 [0.025]	0.066 [0.025]
Median income (in thousands)	-0.051 [0.025]	-0.051 [0.025]	-0.051 [0.025]
Total number of residents (in millions)	-0.460 [2.993]	-0.404 [2.900]	-0.131 [2.968]
Percentage with a bachelor's degree	0.020 [0.011]	0.019 [0.011]	0.020 [0.011]
Percentage with no high school degree	-0.077 [0.028]	-0.077 [0.028]	-0.077 [0.028]
Population growth, 2008–2011	0.000 [0.000]	0.000 [0.000]	0.000 [0.000]
Increase in unemployment, 2011–2012	-0.366 [0.216]	-0.366 [0.216]	-0.366 [0.216]
Constant	-3.946 [0.855]	-3.909 [0.862]	-3.847 [0.870]
Fixed effects for state?	Y	Y	Y
Observations	3,089	3,089	3,089
R-squared	0.970	0.970	0.970

Notes. Cell entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients, with standard errors clustered by state in brackets. The models also include fixed effects for state. The dependent variable is the Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote.

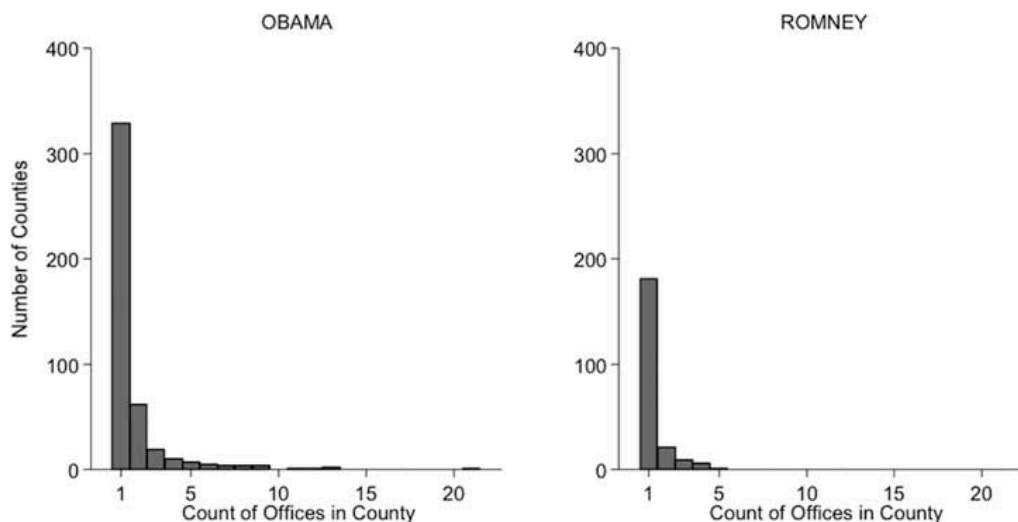


Figure 4. Distribution of Obama and Romney field offices in counties with at least one office.

value of 0). The results are presented in the third column of [Table 2](#), and suggest that as the balance of field offices shifted in Obama's favor, his vote share increased.¹¹

Change in Field Office Location and Votes, 2008–2012

Finally, we extend the analysis in one more direction—this time by analyzing the change in the distribution of field offices between 2008 and 2012 and its relationship to the change in Obama's vote share between these two elections. We compare the presence of Obama and McCain field offices in battleground states in 2008 to the presence of Obama and Romney field offices in these same states in 2012, drawing on the 2008 field office data analyzed in Masket (2009). (These states are Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.)

Across the 876 counties in these 11 states, there is variation in the placement of offices in 2012 compared to 2008. For example, 56 counties had an Obama office in 2012 but not in 2008, while 134 counties had an Obama office in 2008 but not in 2012. We also control for changes in these factors: the percentage of Black and Hispanic residents, the percentage of residents age 18 or younger, population size, population growth, and the trend in unemployment. We control for counties that had no Obama offices in either year, as well as those that had neither Romney nor McCain offices—again, to distinguish these counties from those that would also take on a value of 0 because they had the same number of Obama or Romney/McCain offices in these two years.

The results (available upon request) suggest that changes in Obama field offices, but not changes in Republican field offices, were associated with increasing Obama vote share. Other things equal, having an Obama office in 2012 but not in 2008 was associated with an additional 0.65 points of vote share for Obama. By contrast, having a Romney office but no McCain office—which was true of 57 counties in these states—was neither substantively nor statistically significant. This pattern resembles what we found when examining 2012 alone: an association between vote share and the presence of Obama field offices but not Romney field offices.¹²

Field Offices and Aggregate Vote Share

The association between vote share and field offices suggests that Obama's field operation was associated with an increased number of votes in 2012. But how many votes? We can extend the analysis by translating this association into aggregate votes, and simulating counterfactuals in which the impact of Obama's field offices was reduced. Using the second model presented in [Table 2](#), we generated predicted vote shares based on the actual number of Obama field offices and then assuming that there had been no Obama field offices at all. We then multiplied those predicted vote shares by the number of votes for Obama or Romney in each county, and summed up the estimated number of votes by state and then nationally. This exercise suggests that Obama received 293,160 additional votes nationwide than he would have had there been no field offices.¹³ Of course, we hasten to add that this is a simple counterfactual that does not account for other kinds of campaign activity, particularly advertising.

Within the battleground states, the margins were large enough that field office activity likely made little difference in the outcome—at least under this counterfactual. This is somewhat different from 2008. In that election, Masket (2009) found that the field offices could have been responsible for Obama victories in Florida, Indiana, and North Carolina, although these states alone did not determine the national outcome. In 2012, field offices potentially influenced the outcome only in Florida (again, under this counterfactual). Obama won just 50.44% of the two-party vote in that state. Had there been no field offices, we estimate that Obama would have received about 45,000 fewer votes in Florida, giving Romney a narrow victory there, with 50.1% of the two-party vote. Of course, even if Florida had gone the other way, Obama would still have won the Electoral College.

Discussion

The apparent effects of field offices in 2012 resemble what studies of previous elections have found (Darr & Levendusky, 2014; Masket, 2009). In particular, Obama offices were associated with increases in his vote share, but there is less evidence that either McCain or Romney offices manifested a similar association with their vote shares. How confident can we be that these associations are not spurious consequences of the strategic location of offices? Several pieces of evidence make us at least somewhat confident that this is not the case.

First, our results resemble those of Enos and Fowler (2014), who analyze the impact of the 2012 campaign on turnout (not vote share, as we do here). They compare turnout within media markets that spanned a battleground and non-battleground state, under the assumption that any differences between the portions of the market in each state would derive from get-out-the-vote efforts, since television advertising would be constant within markets. They find that turnout was higher in the portions of these media markets in battleground states. However, they find little difference in the turnout of Democratic and Republican voters, who would have been targeted by get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts. They conclude the following: “Despite the purported technological sophistication of the Obama campaign and its intense use of data-driven, evidence-based campaign tactics . . . we see similar mobilization effects on both sides of [Figure 3](#). The two campaigns were roughly comparable in their ability to turn out supporters” (p. 18). Although we do find a larger association between Obama offices and vote share than between Romney offices and vote share, our conclusion

nevertheless matches theirs: the net effect of the ground campaign was not a decisive factor in Obama's victory.

Second, our results resemble those of Darr and Levendusky (2014), who analyze an additional election year (2004), although are limited by data availability to estimating the association between vote share and only Kerry or Obama field offices. The models in Darr and Levendusky control not only for demographic and political factor as well as state fixed effects, but also for county fixed effects—something that helps to account for other county-level factors not explicitly captured in their or our models. Thus, their results represent the association between field offices and vote share within counties over time, arguably a more rigorous test than looking at cross-sections of counties within election years. As did Masket (2009) and as do we, they find that the presence of a Democratic field office is significantly associated with Democratic vote share. Darr and Levendusky also show that Obama field offices in 2008 were not associated with Kerry's vote share in 2004—a “placebo test” suggesting that their results are not strongly affected by unmeasured confounders. Such tests cannot rule out the possibility of confounding, but they are supportive evidence of the kind of analysis we undertake here.

Third, we performed our own placebo tests for the 2012 field offices, the results of which appear in Appendix Tables A1 and A2. These tables report on models of the county-level Democratic presidential vote in the 2008 and 2004 presidential elections and the district-level Democratic House vote in the 2010 midterm election. The number of campaign field offices is coded 0, 1, or 2+ as in Model 2 of Table 2. The demographic variables are derived from the closest indicators available for each election year. The field office variables have large standard errors and do not come close to statistical significance in each model. The implication of this test is that the association between field offices and vote share reported in Table 2 is not spurious.

We also found no significant association between field offices and the 2012 congressional vote, suggesting that the impact of presidential field offices did not “spill over” and affect congressional candidates. These results can be seen in the second column of Table A2. In analyses that are available from the authors, we found no significant association between field offices and two measures of shifts in the underlying partisan complexion of areas within the country: the change in the 2008–2010 congressional vote, and changes in Google search volume for “Obama” and “Romney” between both 2008–2012 and 2011–2012.

Conclusion

In the 2012 presidential election, the ground game appeared to affect the vote. In particular, the Obama campaign's field operation was associated with increased vote share for him. However, Romney's field offices—much as McCain's field offices in 2008—did not have an association that was as large or precisely estimated.¹⁴

Although we conclude that the overall ground game strategies in 2012 were not pivotal to the outcome, we would not argue that field organizations were in any way a waste of campaign resources. For one, in a closer election, this type of electioneering could very well have been pivotal. Moreover, if one side had stood down and allowed the other side to out-organize them, this would have created the kind of imbalance in campaign activity that can impact voters and, perhaps, the election outcome itself. In the “tug of war” of presidential campaigning (Sides & Vavreck, 2013), it is important for both sides to pull hard.

Thus, our analysis buttresses a growing body of evidence that field organizations are an integral and effective mode of campaigning that may make the difference between winning and losing when and where the race is tight. Our analysis also throws into sharp relief the gap between the field organizations of recent Democratic and Republican presidential campaigns—one that Romney was unable to close in 2012, but one that was unlikely to have cost him the election.

Notes

1. Political science field experiments on turnout have helped isolate the effects of electioneering during real campaigns, but few designs have deployed treatments intense enough that opposing campaigns might detect the treatment and counter it. The design of such an experiment might also require opposing campaigns to detect the treatment in non-competitive areas and make the decision, for example, to ignore these areas (as is common when campaigns have scarce resources to deploy). Even when field experiments have delivered treatments that could be observed by opposing campaigns (Gerber et al., 2011), they have done so in elections without challengers, perhaps due to ethical concerns about influencing the outcome of the election.

2. For example, upon visiting a Romney field office in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, we observed campaign signs for many other Ohio races, especially the Senate race between Josh Mandel and Sherrod Brown.

3. Bird also said the campaign stratified battleground states into those believed to be crucial—these were Colorado, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Virginia—and those believed to be secondary (such as Florida and North Carolina). The former group received more resources—“they got whatever they wanted” and were “saturated,” said Bird.

4. This was again consistent with what we observed at the Cuyahoga and Medina County Boards of Election in October 2012. On the night before in-person early voting began in Ohio, Obama field organizers in Cleveland set up tents and portable bathrooms along the sidewalks leading up to the polling location. There was also entertainment from professional disc jockeys. This was to prepare for people who would get in line to vote and wait all night. In Medina County, a much more Republican-leaning county relative to Cuyahoga, we observed no such mobilization tactics by either party.

5. This analysis is available in the supplementary materials for their article: http://sites.sas.upenn.edu/mleven/files/gg_appendix_final.pdf

6. We coded the following states as battleground states: Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

7. We rely on county-level data because this is the lowest level of aggregation for which election returns are currently available across the states.

8. All variables were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/download_data.html), with the exception of unemployment data, obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (<http://www.bls.gov/lau/laucntycur14.zip>).

9. For example, we estimated the effect of having zero, one, two, or three or more Obama offices or Romney offices, accounting for the other variables in Table 2. For the Obama office variables, the coefficients and standard errors were 1 office ($b = .30$; $SE = .16$), 2 offices ($b = .84$, $SE = .32$), and 3 or more offices ($b = .43$, $SE = .38$). For the Romney office variables, the comparable statistics were 1 office ($b = -.14$; $SE = .18$), 2 offices ($b = -.32$, $SE = .38$), and 3 or more offices ($b = .09$, $SE = .23$). Thus, for both Obama and Romney, the apparent effect of three or more offices is smaller than that of two offices. Estimating the separate effects of one or two or more field offices suggests a fairly linear pattern. Having one Obama office in a county is associated with a .29 gain in vote share ($SE = .16$); having two or more is associated with a .72 gain in vote share ($SE = .34$). Having one Romney office in a county is associated with a -.16 drop in Obama vote share ($SE = .18$); having two or more is associated with a -.32 drop in Obama vote share ($SE = .30$).

10. One question that arises is whether these associations are confined to battleground states, given that field office activity in non-battleground states may have been directed at battleground states (e.g., by having supporters in, say, Idaho making phone calls to Nevada voters). We interacted the Obama and Romney field office measures in Model 2 with dummy variables for battleground state status (with CO, FL, IA, NV, NH, NC, OH, VA, and WI coded as battleground states), and included these interaction terms in the model. Neither interaction was statistically significant.

11. If we use the difference in the raw number of field offices, the coefficient is .088 ($SE = .056$). In an auxiliary analysis, Darr and Levendusky (2014) also find a statistically significant effect of the difference in the 2012 field offices, using a somewhat different specification than we use here.

12. The question, of course, is whether Obama might have placed field offices in places that were already trending Democratic. If so, and if the control variables in the analysis do not fully capture the characteristics that may have affected the placement of field offices, then our estimate is biased. One piece of evidence that supports our finding comes from Darr and Levendusky (2014), who find that changes in field office placement from 2004 to 2008 were not associated with House vote share in 2006, suggesting that in 2008 Obama was not placing field offices in districts that were trending Democratic.

13. This is very similar to Darr and Levendusky's estimate that the field offices brought Obama an additional 275,000 votes nationally in 2008.

14. An anonymous reviewer speculated that Republican voters might simply be less susceptible to the effects of field organization than are Democratic voters. This is plausible, inasmuch as "marginal" voters—those influenced by exogenous influences on turnout—are disproportionately Democratic (Fowler, 2015).

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Appendix

Table A1

Models of the democratic share of the two-party presidential vote in 2004 and 2008

	2008	2004
Number of Obama offices (0, 1, 2+)	0.050 [0.182]	0.092 [0.199]
Number of Romney offices (0, 1, 2+)	-0.360 [0.318]	-0.287 [0.340]
Kerry or Gore vote share	0.942 [0.016]	0.956 [0.012]
Percentage African-American (2008 or 2004)	0.148 [0.020]	0.059 [0.018]
Percentage Latino (2008 or 2004)	0.196 [0.031]	-0.028 [0.017]
Percentage under 18 (2008 or 2004)	0.15 [0.039]	0.001 [0.071]
Median income (2000, in thousands)	-0.137 [0.037]	-0.135 [0.045]
Total number of residents (2008 or 2004, in millions)	-0.981 [0.408]	-0.325 [0.247]
Percentage with a bachelor's degree (2000)	0.087 [0.020]	0.235 [0.020]
Percentage with no high school degree (2000)	-0.193 [0.026]	0.066 [0.030]
Population growth (2004–2008 or 2000–2004)	0.000 [0.000]	0.000 [0.000]
Increase in unemployment (2007–2008 or 2003–2004)	0.661 [0.210]	0.091 [0.172]
Constant	4.156 [1.385]	-3.23 [1.475]
Fixed effects for state?	Y	Y
Observations	3,088	3,088
R-squared	0.94	0.94

Notes. Cell entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients, with standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. The models also include fixed effects for state. The dependent variable is the Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote.

Table A2
Models of the democratic share of the two-party house vote in 2010 and 2012

	2010	2012
Number of Obama offices (0, 1, 2+)	0.118 [0.783]	-1.963 [1.422]
Number of Romney offices (0, 1, 2+)	0.596 [1.213]	-1.184 [0.854]
2008 Democratic congressional vote share	0.214 [0.042]	-
2008 Democratic presidential vote share	-	0.820 [0.114]
Democratic incumbent	-1.181 [1.323]	0.424 [2.357]
Republican incumbent	-3.356 [1.542]	-0.059 [2.415]
Democratic spending advantage	0.231 [0.037]	0.269 [0.035]
Percentage under 18	-1.423 [0.297]	0.162 [0.234]
Percentage African-American	0.481 [0.044]	-0.149 [0.064]
Percentage Latino	0.295 [0.083]	-0.079 [0.038]
Total number of residents (in millions)	10.930 [7.287]	-40.608 [100.903]
Median income (in thousands)	0.084 [0.058]	-0.000 [0.000]
Constant	35.972 [8.478]	0.073 [8.478]
Fixed effects for state?	Y	Y
Observations	435	435
R-squared	0.838	0.765

Notes. Cell entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients, with standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. The models also include fixed effects for state. The dependent variable is the Democratic share of the two-party House vote.