# Abandoning the Ground Game?
# Field Organization in the 2016 Election

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## Abstract

*I examine the organizational and voter contact strategies of the presidential campaigns in the 2016 election, finding that Hillary Clinton opened many more field offices than Donald Trump. Both Clinton and Trump invested less aggressively in field operations than their predecessors while avoiding areas of opponent strength and "swing" areas. Neither Clinton nor Trump held a clear advantage in voter contact, and estimates of the effects of field offices were smaller than in previous cycles. Clinton's defeat should not be interpreted as evidence that field organizing is a poor investment in 2020.*

In the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton's and Donald Trump's commitments to establishing a "ground game"—local field operations organizing personal voter contact—were consistently doubted and questioned (Milligan 2016). Some Democrats were concerned that Clinton was spending too much money on television and not enough on "what's necessary to turn people out"—the "army of volunteers" cultivated by Barack Obama (Murphy 2016). Obama's campaigns opened hundreds of field offices that coordinated voter contact activities (Masket 2009; Masket, Sides, and Vavreck 2016) and trained local staff and volunteers (Sinclair, McConnell, and Michelson 2013).

After decades of mass mediated campaigning, presidential campaigns began to value in-person mobilization again in the early 2000s and devoted more resources to contact at the local level (Beck and Heidemann 2014; Panagopoulos and Wielhouwer 2008). Several recent articles investigated the electoral impact of these renewed campaign investments in field offices, finding that Democratic offices (but not Republican ones) increased turnout and partisan vote share by around 1 percent (Darr and Levendusky 2014; Masket 2009; Masket, Sides, and Vavreck 2016; Weinschenk 2015). Were field offices similarly effective in the 2016 election?

In this article, I analyze original data on the location of Clinton and Trump field offices to determine the placement and voter contact strategies of these candidates' field organizations. I find that Clinton's campaign opened far fewer offices than Obama, but more than Trump, and did not invest as aggressively in Republican areas as did Obama. Similarly, Trump's campaign invested far less in the field than Mitt Romney did four years prior. The campaigns contacted voters at similar rates, according to survey self-reports. Clinton's were more effective at increasing Democratic vote share, though less so than previous studies' estimates of the impact

of Obama's offices. Trump's offices had no positive correlation with Republican vote share, and unlike 2012, field offices had minimal discernible effects on turnout.

It is difficult to know why Clinton's campaign did not match Obama's investment in the field. Campaign leadership may have viewed offices as cost-ineffective (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), given the potential for backlash (Bailey, Hopkins, and Rogers 2016). Campaigns must calculate marginal utility in their spending as they decide between travel, advertising, field operations, and other necessities (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). Advertising effects decay rapidly, and there is little evidence that candidate visits make a difference (Hill et al. 2016; Wood 2016). Even if they are not decisive except in extremely close elections, field offices should produce positive effects such as trained volunteers and voter-level data for future down-ballot candidates (Hersh 2015; Masket 2009). Clinton's relative underinvestment in field did not cause her to lose the election, but her smaller field organization in 2016 could hurt future Democratic campaigns' organizing efforts.

## Field Offices and Voter Mobilization

Campaigns must decide where to strategically allocate resources, not just geographically but also across media and travel (Campbell 2008; Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout 2007; Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007; Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Shaw 2006). Beginning in the 2000s, presidential campaigns began to value in-person mobilization again and devoted more resources to targeting and contact at the local level—a development that coincided with improvements in the quality and availability of voter-level data (Hersh 2015). The rise of field experimentation in political science allowed for rigorous testing of voter contact methods, including the finding that in-person canvassing is the most effective technique for increasing turnout (Gerber and Green 2000). Field organization became a logical investment for campaigns

during this time: local offices could target voters with better data while simultaneously collecting data on voters, using demonstrably effective tactics such as personally asking supporters to get involved and volunteer their labor in their communities (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Sinclair, McConnell, and Michelson 2013; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Field offices coordinate these tactics, allowing campaign staffers to recruit and train volunteers, determine canvassing routes, and help voters make plans to vote in their community (Darr and Levendusky 2014; Masket, Sides, and Vavreck 2016; Nickerson 2007; Nickerson and Rogers 2010). These activities operate simultaneously with advertisements, candidate and surrogate appearances, and media appearances, making it difficult to detect their effects in a real campaign (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004; Masket, Sides, and Vavreck 2016; Sides and Vavreck 2013).

## Data and Empirical Approach

A research assistant collected data on field office locations from the websites of the two major party candidates in 2016 (www.hillaryclinton.com and www.donaldjtrump.com). Clinton's website used on a "Find your field office" tool that returned the nearest field office to a given ZIP code. The research assistant systematically entered ZIP codes into the tool to find Clinton's offices. Trump's website did not list any field offices until October, and these were collected the week before Election Day, supplemented with data from the website Democracy in Action (p2016.org; Darr and Levendusky 2014; Masket 2009). Data on field offices from previous elections comes from the replication data of Darr and Levendusky (2014), with data added from the American Community Survey.

The following analyses will explore the extent of field office investment in 2016; the placement strategy of Clinton and Trump's offices; self-reported campaign contact methods in

areas with field offices; and, finally, a replication of the models from Masket (2009), Masket, Sides, and Vavreck (2016), and Weinschenk (2015), to determine the effects of field offices on voters. Each of these models updates a previous finding from 2008 or 2012, and compares the 2016 results to these previous elections.

## Where Campaigns Opened Offices

Both Clinton and Trump made smaller investments in field operations than did their predecessors: Clinton's 538 offices fell short of Obama's 965 offices in 2008 and 791 in 2012, while Trump's 165 offices did not match Mitt Romney's 283 in 2012 (Darr and Levendusky, 2014). Figure 1 displays national maps of field offices for Obama and Romney in 2012 and Clinton and Trump in 2016.

**[Insert Figure 1 here]**

All campaigns focused on battleground states (Panagopoulos, 2016), but varied widely in the number and concentration of their offices. Democrats invested much more aggressively in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Colorado than did Republicans, and both Democratic campaigns were more likely to open offices in non-battleground states. Romney and Trump both targeted Michigan, which Trump eventually won, in a rare example of Republicans matching Democratic investments in the field. Overall, there was substantially less total field organization in the 2016 election than in 2012.

One state in particular, Wisconsin, received intense focus after Clinton lost it in 2016: Clinton infamously did not travel to the state in the fall and admitted to being "caught by surprise" by the loss after polls showed her "comfortably ahead" (Clinton 2017; Glauber 2017). Clinton may not have travelled there, but she did set up at least one field office in 30 of the

state's counties. However, as the maps in Figure 2 demonstrate, Clinton's ground game in Wisconsin did not match Obama's from four years prior.

**[Insert Figure 2 here]**

In 2012, the Obama campaign opened field offices in 43 of Wisconsin's 72 counties. In total, Clinton's 40 offices fell substantially short of Obama's 69 offices in the state. Some counties are more valuable than others, and Milwaukee County is the largest county by population and the largest source of Democratic votes in the state. Clinton opened four offices in Milwaukee County, compared to Obama's ten, which coincided with a 44,000-vote decrease in Democratic votes in the county—larger than Clinton's eventual 22,748-vote loss in the state. Similarly, Dane County (where Madison is located) received three Clinton offices compared to seven from Obama in 2012. Democratic strongholds received less attention, and produced fewer votes, for Clinton in 2016 than they had four years earlier. Clinton's weaker investment in Wisconsin also meant that she competed less aggressively in counties that were less obviously Democratic, but could still have contributed votes. Overall, Clinton did not open offices in 13 counties where Obama had offices in 2012, including several counties (such as Richland, Portage, and Douglas) where she received more than 40 percent of the vote.

This lackluster investment in Wisconsin was mimicked across many, but not all, of the battleground states in 2016. Campaigns strategically determine a set of battleground states whose electoral votes are needed to win a majority of the electoral college, and invest most of their resources in those states (Colantoni, Levesque, and Ordeshook 1975; Kelly 1961). Of the eleven battleground states in the 2016 election, Clinton opened fewer offices than Obama's 2012 campaign in all but three of them, as shown in Figure 3.

**[Insert Figure 3 here]**

With the exceptions of Nevada, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania, Clinton's ground game was not as extensive as Obama's in the battleground states (all of which were also battleground states in 2012). The state with the largest partisan vote share swing from 2012 to 2016, Iowa, also had the largest difference in counties with field offices (-28), reflecting a possible strategic shift away from unfriendly terrain. In the states targeted most heavily by Clinton, such as Ohio, North Carolina, and Florida (Brownstein 2016), her campaign fell short of Obama's efforts by 13, 10, and 7 counties, respectively. In the 2016 battleground states combined, Clinton's campaign opened offices in 94 fewer counties than Obama did in 2012.

## Placement Strategies in 2016

What were the strategies behind field office placement in 2016, and how did those compare to 2012? If there are differences in the effects of field offices in 2016, these may be partially explained by changes in investment strategy. The results in Table 1 re-estimate the placement analyses from Darr and Levendusky (2014, Table 1), using data on Clinton and Trump in 2016.

**[Insert Table 1 here]**

Democratic and Republican field investment strategies in 2016 are largely similar to 2012, though smaller coefficients reflect decreased investment in field offices on both sides (Darr and Levendusky, 2014). Measured by Republican normal vote (Levendusky, Pope, and Jackman, 2008), more Republican areas received more Trump offices and fewer Clinton offices (Columns 1 and 2). Both campaigns targeted their core areas in similar ways: for instance, like Romney, Trump targeted reliably Republican counties much less aggressively than Obama or Clinton targeted Democratic core counties (0.153 Clinton offices in Democratic core areas vs. 0.025 Trump offices in Republican core areas; Columns 3 and 4). Both campaigns avoided areas

favorable to their opponent when their opponent opened an office there (Columns 5 and 6; Darr and Levendusky 2014).

Several differences from the 2012 analysis provide insight into strategic shifts between the cycles. The Clinton campaign avoided Republican counties without Trump offices, whereas Obama was no more or less likely to invest in these areas (Darr and Levendusky, 2014). By avoiding Republican counties without Trump offices, Clinton may have missed Democratic voters whom Obama reached (Demissie, 2012). In contrast to 2012, when Romney was more likely to open an office in a swing county, the Trump campaign avoided swing counties whether Clinton opened an office there or not (Columns 4 and 6; Darr and Levendusky 2014; Masket, Sides, and Vavreck, 2016). Each 2016 campaign pursued a weaker version of a "base activation" strategy in the field (Panagopoulos 2016).

## Campaign Contact

Were voters more likely to be contacted in areas with Clinton offices, Trump offices, or both (Beck et al., n.d.)? To answer these questions, I adopted the logit model[1] for campaign contact from Masket, Sides, and Vavreck (2016) in their analysis of field offices and voter contact in the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), with data from the 2016 election and survey data from the 2016 CCES.[2] Instead of looking at areas with either or both campaign's offices, however, I used an interaction of Trump and Clinton offices, and present the results as marginal predicted probabilities of voter contact (any contact, in-person contact, phone, email, and direct mail) in counties with no field offices in 2016, Trump offices only, Clinton offices only, and areas with both campaigns' offices. The results appear as plots of marginal predicted probabilities in Figure 4, with full results available in Table A2 in the Supplemental Appendix.

**[Insert Figure 4 here]**

Several trends across both candidates are clear: phone calls are the most common type of contact, and in-person contact is the least common. Significantly more voter contact occurred in areas with both offices (63.8 percent) than in areas without either (53.7 percent), as in 2012 (Masket, Sides and Vavreck 2016). Comparing Clinton and Trump, the only type of contact for which Clinton's offices exceeded Trump's was in-person contact (21.8 percent compared to 16.8 percent)—the least common type of contact (and the one that relies most heavily on volunteers in field offices)—and even this difference is not significant due to the large standard errors on the Trump-only estimate. Respondents in areas with only Trump offices were somewhat more likely to report receiving phone calls than respondents in Clinton-only areas (76.7 percent vs. 72.1 percent). The types of contact least associated with field office activities—email and direct mail—showed very little fluctuation between areas. While the most "contested" areas (counties with both campaigns' offices) had significantly more voter contact than the areas without either, Clinton offices were no more effective than Trump offices at contacting voters.

## Field Office Effects in 2016

Several published articles have examined field office effects across elections ranging from 2004 to 2012. In Figure 2, I re-estimate the models from three of those articles using 2016 data, with the exception of standardizing percentage variables as 0-100, not 0-1 (as in Masket 2009). State-level fixed effects are included in each analysis, as in all of these articles. The results are presented as coefficient plots with 95 percent confidence intervals in Figure 5.

**[Insert Figure 5 here]**

Figure 5a shows the results of an update of the model from Masket (2009) with data from 2016. The first published article on field office effects, by Seth Masket (2009), found that Obama

offices in areas without John Kerry offices in 2004 were associated with a 0.8 percent Democratic vote share increase. Masket also compared the effectiveness of Obama's and John McCain's offices, showing that only Obama offices in areas without McCain offices in 2008 increased Democratic two-party vote share, by 0.6 percent. Masket concludes that Obama's offices disproportionately increased Democratic vote share, and were an effective tool for voter mobilization. Updating Masket (2009)'s model to 2016 data reveals that Clinton's offices did not effectively expand upon Obama's footprint, as shown in Figure 5a.

In Model 1, estimating the model in Table 1 of Masket (2009, 1031), there are not enough Clinton offices in areas without an Obama 2012 office to discern a significant effect. The interaction term also demonstrates that there was no additional gain for Clinton in areas with Clinton and 2012 Obama offices. The Democratic vote difference was higher (+0.81 percent) in areas where Obama had a field office and Clinton did not, indicating that her campaign may have missed areas of enthusiasm which could have been mobilized more effectively. In Model 2 (Masket 2009, 1033), when compared to areas with Trump offices, there is a clear and significant positive relationship between areas with only Clinton offices and Democratic vote share (+1.68 percent). No significant relationship exists for areas with Trump offices only or areas with both campaigns' offices.

Figure 5b shows the results of an update of the model from Masket, Sides, and Vavreck (2016) using data from 2016. Masket subsequently examined field offices in the 2012 election, with coauthors Lynn Vavreck and John Sides. These authors find that Obama field offices were associated with a greater Obama vote share, with no similar effects of Mitt Romney's offices on his vote share (Masket, Sides and Vavreck 2016). Areas with an Obama office only were associated with increased Democratic vote share (0.29%), as were areas with more Obama

offices (0.32%) and areas where Obama had more offices than Romney (0.23% for each additional Obama office). The relationships observed by Masket in 2008 endured in 2012, despite Romney's improved field operations: Obama's vote share increased along with his field investments, while Romney's were ineffective.

Figure 5b reveals similar trends in 2016. Areas with a Clinton office have a 0.99 percent higher Democratic vote share, an effect that weakens but remains significant in other models. Additional field offices (categorized as 0, 1, and more than 2) are associated with 0.81 percent higher Democratic vote share (Model 2), and Clinton minus Trump offices is associated with a 0.38 percent increase in Democratic vote share (Model 3). There is a clear, positive association between Democratic offices and vote share and no impact of Republican offices.

Figure 5c shows the results of an update of the model from Weinschenk (2015) using data from 2016. Neither of the studies above examine the variable, turnout, that was central to previous studies of mobilization techniques (Gerber and Green 2000). Weinschenk (2015) uses the replication data from Darr and Levendusky (2014) to show that field offices increased turnout, and Obama offices seemed to explain most of the increase. Replication of this analysis in 2016, displayed in Figure 5c, above, indicate that there was no similar increase in turnout per each additional field office from either campaign. The only significant effect was a 1.48 percent decrease in turnout for each additional Clinton field office in 2016 in Model 4, including both Clinton and Trump offices in the model. While Obama's offices are uniformly associated with higher turnout in 2012, Clinton's 2016 efforts were associated with no change or lower turnout.

## Conclusion

The 2016 election represented a step backwards in field organization for both Democrats and Republicans, compared to 2008 (Masket, 2009) and 2012 (Masket, Sides, and Vavreck,

2016; Weinschenk, 2015). Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump opened fewer offices than their party's previous nominee. Democratic offices outnumbered Republican ones, but Clinton's campaign left many areas unrepresented that Obama prioritized four years prior. Obama's 2012 campaign used field activities to persuade voters, not simply activate supporters, and Clinton missed the chance to persuade these voters with face-to-face contact (Masket, Sides, and Vavreck 2016; however, see Bailey, Hopkins, and Rogers 2016). Clinton had fewer offices overall than Obama, hampering her ability to effectively mobilize supporters in places like Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, where she opened six fewer offices than Obama did in 2012 while netting 40,000 fewer votes. A larger investment in favorable counties and swing counties should result in positive consequences for a campaign, though possibly not enough to offset the marginal costs of opening additional offices.

Looking forward to 2020, Democrats should not learn the wrong lesson from 2016. Democrats continue to have an edge over Republicans in effective field organizing, and given the rarity of asymmetric advantages in campaigning, they should exploit it (Sides and Vavreck 2013). Clinton's campaign organization did not rise to the bar set by Obama's in 2012. While this underinvestment was possibly a deliberate choice based on calculations of marginal costs and benefits (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), Clinton's campaign nonetheless missed opportunities to train volunteers, gather data, and conduct face-to-face conversations with voters in the areas that mattered the most.

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## Table

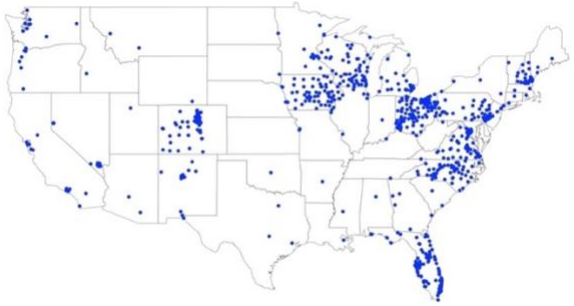
**Table 1. Candidate field office placement, 2016.**

| | (1) Clinton | (2) Trump | (3) Clinton | (4) Trump | (5) Clinton | (6) Trump |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Opponent's field office | 0.930* | 0.181* | 0.922* | 0.182* | 1.277* | 0.283* |
| | (0.037) | (0.007) | (0.037) | (0.007) | (0.043) | (0.020) |
| Normal vote (% Republican) | -0.376* | 0.193* | | | | |
| | (0.110) | (0.048) | | | | |
| Swing county | | | 0.060 | -0.010 | -0.015 | -0.003 |
| | | | (0.035) | (0.017) | (0.038) | (0.016) |
| Core county | | | 0.153* | 0.025* | | |
| | | | (0.028) | (0.012) | | |
| Opposition county | | | | | -0.068* | -0.017 |
| | | | | | (0.027) | (0.013) |
| Swing county x Opponent's office | | | | | -0.562* | -0.201* |
| | | | | | (0.131) | (0.026) |
| Opposition county x Opponent's office | | | | | -1.026* | -0.094* |
| | | | | | (0.066) | (0.020) |
| Battleground State | 0.351* | 0.128* | 0.332* | 0.098* | 0.393* | 0.086* |
| | (0.091) | (0.040) | (0.088) | (0.039) | (0.085) | (0.039) |
| Median age | 0.002 | -0.002* | 0.002 | -0.002* | 0.002 | -0.002 |
| | (0.002) | (0.001) | (0.002) | (0.001) | (0.002) | (0.001) |
| Population (in millions) | 1.060* | 0.198* | 1.051* | 0.194* | 1.017* | 0.180* |
| | (0.054) | (0.025) | (0.054) | (0.025) | (0.052) | (0.025) |
| Population squared | -0.098* | -0.022* | -0.097* | -0.022* | -0.090* | -0.020* |
| | (0.008) | (0.003) | (0.008) | (0.003) | (0.007) | (0.003) |
| Median income | -0.213 | -0.209* | -0.205 | -0.176* | -0.140 | -0.167* |
| | (0.119) | (0.053) | (0.117) | (0.052) | (0.112) | (0.051) |
| Percent African-American | 0.001 | 0.001* | 0.001 | 0.000 | 0.002 | 0.000 |
| | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.000) | (0.001) | (0.000) |
| Percent Hispanic | 0.045 | 0.110 | 0.083 | 0.050 | 0.070 | 0.040 |
| | (0.129) | (0.057) | (0.122) | (0.054) | (0.118) | (0.054) |
| Percent with < HS diploma | 0.002 | -0.003* | 0.002 | -0.003* | 0.003 | -0.003* |
| | (0.003) | (0.001) | (0.003) | (0.001) | (0.003) | (0.001) |
| Percent with college degree | 0.007* | 0.002* | 0.007* | 0.001 | 0.008* | 0.001 |
| | (0.002) | (0.001) | (0.002) | (0.001) | (0.002) | (0.001) |
| Constant | -0.013 | 0.016 | -0.285 | 0.139 | -0.280 | 0.160 |
| | (0.166) | (0.073) | (0.143) | (0.065) | (0.141) | (0.063) |
| Observations | 3,109 | 3,109 | 3,109 | 3,109 | 3,109 | 3,109 |
| R-squared | 0.547 | 0.451 | 0.550 | 0.450 | 0.584 | 0.460 |

*Note.* Model specification from Darr and Levendusky 2014, model 1 (p. 534). Cell entries are ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients that can be statistically distinguished from 0 ($\alpha < 0.05$ two-tailed) are marked with an asterisk (*). Dependent variables are coded from 0-100.

## Figures

**Figure 1.** Maps of Democratic and Republican campaign field offices, 2012 and 2016.



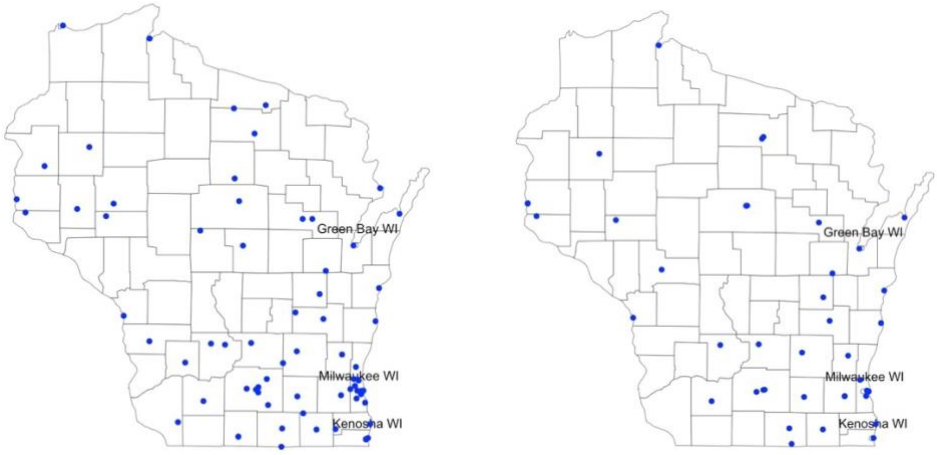
*Obama 2012*

*Romney 2012*

*Clinton 2016*

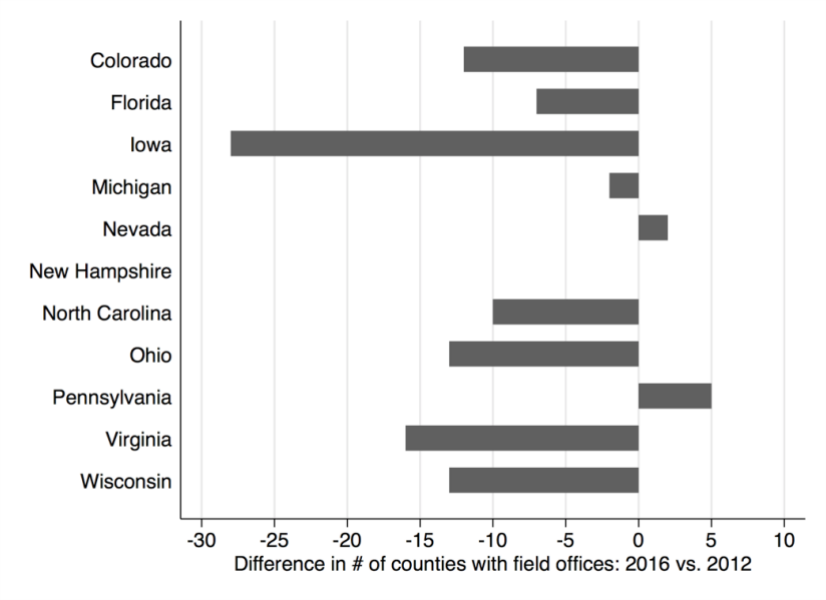
*Trump 2016*

**Figure 2.** Comparison of Obama 2012 and Clinton 2016 offices in Wisconsin.



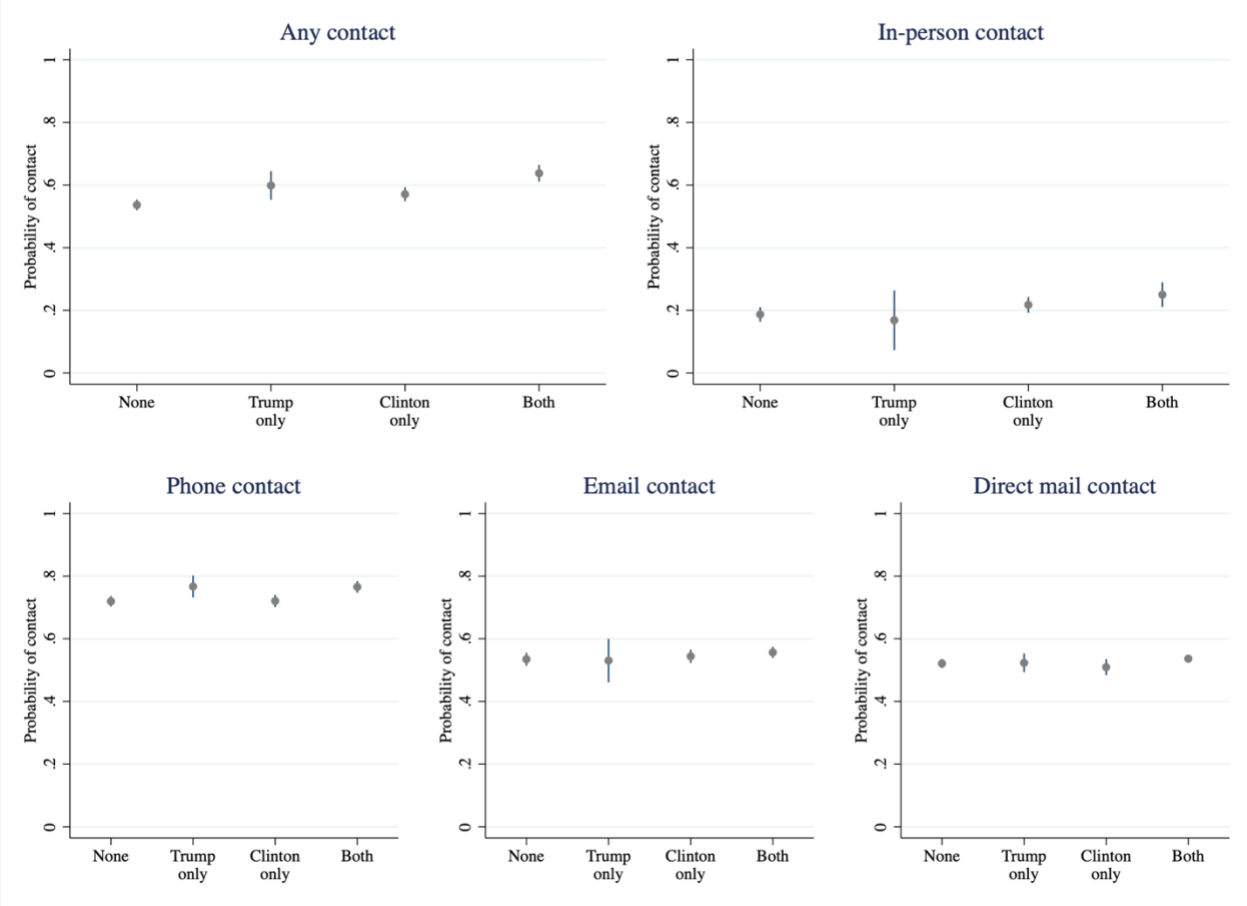

*Obama 2012* *Clinton 2016*

**Figure 3.** Differences in number of counties containing Democratic field offices in 2012 and 2016, in 2016 battleground states.



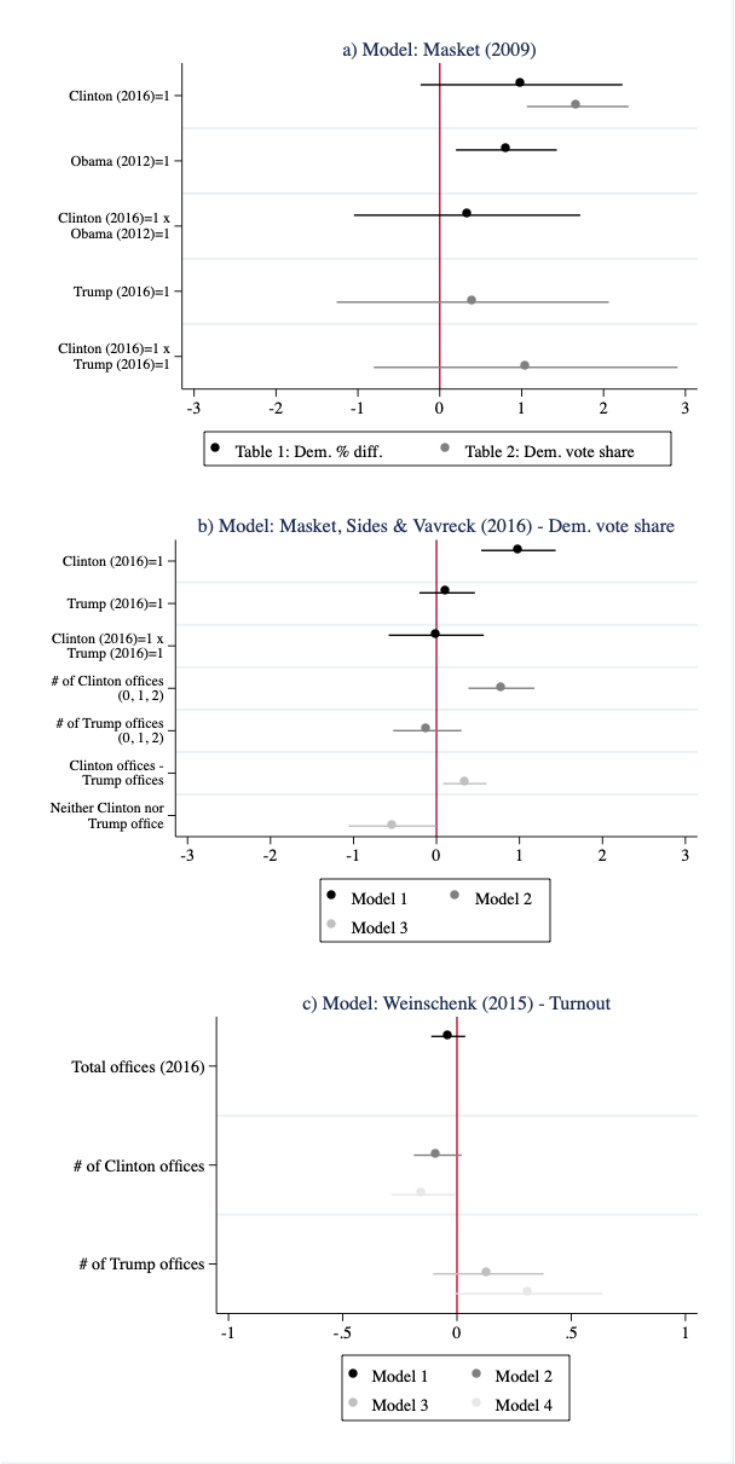

*Note*. Complete descriptive statistics found in Table A1 of the Supplemental Appendix.

**Figure 4.** Self-reported campaign contact by field office presence in county of residency, 2016 CCES.




*Note.* Plots of marginal predicted probabilities calculated from logistic regression using -marginsplot- in Stata. Full results appear in Table A2 of the Supplemental Appendix.

**Figure 5.** Field office effects in the 2016 presidential election, modeled according to articles on field office effects (Masket 2009, Masket Sides and Vavreck 2016, Weinschenk 2015).




*Note*. Figure 2a is estimated using data from the 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections. Coefficient plots represent ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients. Coefficients that can be statistically distinguished from zero (alpha < 0.05, two-tailed) are separate from the line at zero. Full tables appear in Tables A3, A4, and A5, respectively, of the Supplemental Appendix.

[1] Individual-level covariates included battleground state residency, voter registration status, voting in the previous election, age (in years), and dummy variables for gender (female), race (Black, Hispanic, Asian, other), union member (current and former), self or family in military, home ownership, born again evangelical, education, income, and marital status. Full question wording appears in "Appendix B – Question Wording" in the Supplemental Appendix.

[2] The 2016 CCES was conducted by researchers at Harvard University, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and YouGov. The survey was conducted over the Internet by YouGov, with the common content asked of 64,600 U.S. adults in October and November 2016, sampled using YouGov's matched random sample methodology. The AAPOR Response Rate 1 for the full sample was 0.139. Complete details on the sampling and question wording in the 2016 CCES can be found at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GDF6Z0.