## 1 Back to the Office

Driving into the Polk County Steak Fry on September 22, 2019, the innumerable yard signs for Democratic presidential contenders flipped past the car windows like a deck of cards being shuffled. Beto in black, Amy in green, Biden in white, Pete and Kamala in yellow, repeat. The sign wars between campaign workers started before sunrise, but the impressive aftermath greeted the 11,000 attendees entering Water Works Park in Des Moines, hoping to hear from the candidates – and while they were at it, buy a steak, baked beans, and potato salad to support the Polk County Democrats.

In addition to the heavy lunch, the county party supplied campaigns with an important resource that day: a space to organize next to the parking area. These spaces were roughly the same size but varied wildly in the ways campaigns put them to use. This physical space empowered campaigns to put their personality, resources, and enthusiasm on display, and allowed visitors to compare strategies and support side-by-side. Each campaign brought a bit of personality, intentionally or not.

The road to the Steak Fry bottlenecked just before attendees reached the parking area, and the Harris campaign guarded the pass with yellow shirts and purple signs. Tall black-and-white Beto signposts were held aloft behind them, his people obscured and resigned to the back half of the entrance point. The O'Rourke and Harris campaigns' allotted spaces were near the entrance, so they used that advantage and abandoned their tents in the early morning.

Once drivers fought through the bottleneck, the Biden campaign greeted them with the opposite of battlefield tactics. His space felt like a touch-a-truck event for children, with a pancake-making station, ice cream truck, and fire engine reflecting his endorsement by the Iowa Fire Fighters Union. A lone college-aged volunteer held up a Biden sign along the path.

The Buttigieg campaign purchased a $35 ticket for anyone who signed up through peteforamerica.com, and provided them with bright yellow shirts, rally signs with a one-day shelf life ("The Steaks Are Too High"), and choreographed chants. (The author in attendance, Darr, paid for his own steak.) Behind his bus, a large crowd milled about in hopes of seeing the candidate speak briefly.

Cory Booker supporters tossed footballs around, waiting for the attendees to come to them. Michael Bennet's volunteers played catch and cornhole on a hand-painted board next to a 12-foot-long prop gavel illustrating the *Des Moines Register*'s editorial observation that he was "pounding truth into the campaign" (*Des Moines Register* 2019).

Other campaigns clearly hoped to use the Steak Fry not only for the visibility but also to sign up supporters and make volunteers out of them. Warren's

campaign formed several tight circles around their trained organizers, making sure that first-time volunteers knew what to do when the event began. Each received a "Liberty Green" helium balloon attached to their shirt so that Warren-friendly attendees could find them in the crowd. Everything ran like clockwork, connecting the volunteers' training to the candidate's speech pointing out the balloons, and culminating in her signature "selfie line" that stole away a good portion of the crowd once she was done speaking.

The Sanders campaign, on the other hand, did not show up except to place a prop. Their space featured a small tent and a door pulled from its hinges. A sign pinned to the door told interested attendees that Sanders organizers and volunteers were not there because, as the prop would suggest, they were out in Iowa neighborhoods knocking doors. Bernie's message was clear: the actual work of campaigning was knocking doors and playing into the pageantry of the Steak Fry was a distraction.

Harris and O'Rourke's teams used their geographic advantage by the entrance to make a first impression. Klobuchar and Buttigieg briefly spoke to attract curious attendees and energize their supporters for the walk into the event, though Pete could afford to give them shirts and tickets whether they actually supported him or not. Biden's campaign made sure his supporters were happy and well-fed, from the pancakes and ice cream outside to Joe's appearance flipping steaks on the grill inside. Warren took every chance to organize, train, and interact that it could, and the Sanders campaign made its point by leaving the space at the event unused, in favor of voter contact around the state.

Attendees could learn more about the candidates from walking around the parking lot than from listening to the repetitive and recycled stump speeches that rang out, twenty candidates deep, once the event began. That physical space allowed these campaigns to summarize, emphasize, and reinforce their philosophies and personalities by transforming a space to reflect their campaign's ethos and directing that energy outwards to find their voters.

## 1.1 Storefront Campaigning

On most days this sort of activity was happening in a campaign field office, not a field. Field offices are storefront locations that campaigns rent during the election season to serve as a base for their organizing staff to host trainings and events, volunteers making phone calls and heading out to knock doors, and interested passersby picking up literature or signing up for a shift. These local manifestations of national elections offer an entryway to political participation in a familiar and accessible location. Much of the work of elite-driven political participation – simply asking people to participate (Rosenstone and Hansen

1993) – starts in these temporary spaces in the strip malls and Main Streets of cities and towns across America.

In this Element, we examine the role of physical space in political campaign organizing in those field offices: a neighborhood-level presence in a community, set up as a storefront like any other small business. The retail politics that define competitive areas in presidential elections do not take place in a vacuum: they start with retail space. Canvassing conducted by motivated volunteers, the most powerful way to increase turnout (Gerber and Green 2000) and change voters' minds (Broockman and Kalla 2016), along with phone banking, are traditionally conducted in person and coordinated out of physical spaces that campaigns rent in strategic locations according to their perceptions of what is efficient and effective.

Using an original dataset on field office locations across the past three presidential elections and insights from conversations with former Democratic and Republican field organizers, we aim to discern the factors that influence campaigns' field office placement strategies; whether electoral outcomes are improved when a campaign sets up shop in a community; and how offices may have other benefits, such as staff morale, accessibility for harder-to-reach volunteers and voters, and improving participatory democracy. We argue that campaigns, their organizers, and their volunteers benefit from interacting and collaborating within the physical spaces of field offices.

We show that campaign offices help candidates in small but meaningful ways, delivering modest but quantifiable increases in candidate vote share in the areas where they open (Darr and Levendusky 2014). Field offices can increase candidate vote share, but their value differs across parties: Democrats benefit more in battleground states and populous areas, while Republicans' largely rural base of support in recent years provides challenges for maximizing the benefits of in-person organizing.

The 2016 and 2020 presidential elections were decided by razor-thin margins. Trump's 2016 victory rested on roughly 80,000 voters across Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, and his 2020 loss could have been a victory if 44,000 votes in Georgia, Arizona, and Wisconsin went his way (Swasey and Jin 2020). Small shifts in the most competitive states can and do prove decisive. Campaigns should look for every advantage possible where it matters the most, including the adoption of new communication technologies (Stromer-Galley 2014). The substantial organizational and financial resources poured into field organizing, even as digital voter contact becomes more widely adopted, show that campaigns think that in-person mobilization still matters.

American presidential campaigns bring people into the political process who had not previously participated and capture the attention of even the most

infrequent voters. Where that contact is happening – on their television and computer screens or through personal conversations with members of their community at their doors and on the phones – is ultimately a strategic decision by the campaigns that may have profound implications for American politics (Stromer-Galley 2014). Directing national politics away from distant ideological divides and translating those issues into local terms can push back on polarization (Darr et al. 2018, 2021), and talking to people at their doors is the best way to increase political participation (Gerber and Green 2000).

## 1.2 The Ground Game

The "ground game" of localizing a national campaign stands in direct contrast to the "air wars" that defined advertising-driven campaigns in the late twentieth century (Darr and Levendusky 2014). Beginning with Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, which took their decided financial advantage over Republican nominee John McCain and implemented their candidate's community organizing ethos nationwide using nearly 1,000 field offices, the ground game reemerged in recent years as a major undertaking by campaigns from both parties.

After Donald Trump's surprise win in 2016, the stage was set for a revitalization of on-the-ground organizing in 2020. Some Democrats criticized Clinton's comparatively anemic turnout operations and over-investment in television during the campaign (Darr 2020; Masket 2020), and particularly her lack of travel to contested states like Wisconsin (Clinton 2017). The year 2019 and the early months of 2020 saw Democrats making efforts to return to their past dominance in the field. By the time Iowa's caucuses took place in February of 2020, four Democratic campaigns had opened twenty or more offices throughout the state: twenty-four for Warren, twenty-three for Buttigieg, twenty-four for Biden, and twenty-one for Sanders. These investments approached previous levels: Obama opened thirty-seven offices in the 2008 primaries, and in 2016, Sanders had twenty-three while Clinton opened twenty-six (Darr 2016).

Given that Democratic campaigns had opened more than 500 offices in each of the past three cycles, it seemed safe to predict that the eventual nominee would make a similar investment, and as in past cycles – where no Republican had opened more than 300 – once again dominate the "ground game" in the fall.

Things didn't work out that way. If you want to make the political gods laugh, tell them your plans from early 2020.

As in nearly all other aspects of life, the covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 dramatically changed the considerations of the presidential campaigns. Following his victory in South Carolina on February 29 and swift endorsement by his remaining opponents, it was clear Joe Biden would be the Democratic nominee.

Almost immediately, however, his general election campaign suspended any in-person voter contact activities: leadership was worried about public health and messaging concerns around knocking on voters' doors while the candidate was instructing people to socially distance, and they never lifted that ban through Election Day. The Biden campaign opened zero field offices in 2020. By contrast, Donald Trump and the Republican coordinated campaign (known as Trump Victory) charged ahead with over 300 offices in battleground states, establishing uncontested dominance with a field strategy deliberately built upon the model previously adopted primarily by Democrats. The Trump staffers we talked to, including Kevin Marino Cabrera, Florida Director of Trump Victory, were puzzled but pleased by the Democrats' decision:

> I think it was a strategic error on their part to cede the ground to Republicans. I think people were home, more than ever, and we found different ways to do it safely. Obviously you don't have to necessarily stand in front of the door, right, you can be a few feet back . . . We found that people were home, more than ever, and that they were definitely looking to engage in conversation. (Cabrera, personal communication, July 18, 2022)

The 2020 experience increased the urgency of a simple yet critical question for campaign managers and scholars of American political behavior: does storefront campaigning work? Can field offices help campaigns move votes in their direction? Are they worth the substantial investments in rent, supplies, and salaries needed to open and sustain hundreds of offices nationwide?

The scholarship on field office placement and effects is mostly focused on the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections, when Democratic candidates clearly held the edge in the field. After John McCain accepted public funding and its spending limits in 2008 while Barack Obama refused it, McCain was swamped in the field, on the airwaves, and at the polls. Figure 1 shows the progression of field offices over the past three presidential election cycles, where Democratic dominance is clear – until 2020, when it isn't there at all.

Mitt Romney leveled the financial playing field by refusing public funding in 2012 and raising comparable amounts of money to Obama, but did not come close to matching his efforts in organizing. Romney's 283 offices represented a substantial increase in Republican field offices but still represented less than half of Obama's total. According to analyses by Darr and Levendusky (2014), Romney's offices were more likely to be found in areas where Obama opened an office, and spread fairly evenly over swing and core counties (i.e. those that switched between elections and those where Republicans regularly receive over 50 percent of the vote). Romney's offices were less likely to be found in reliably

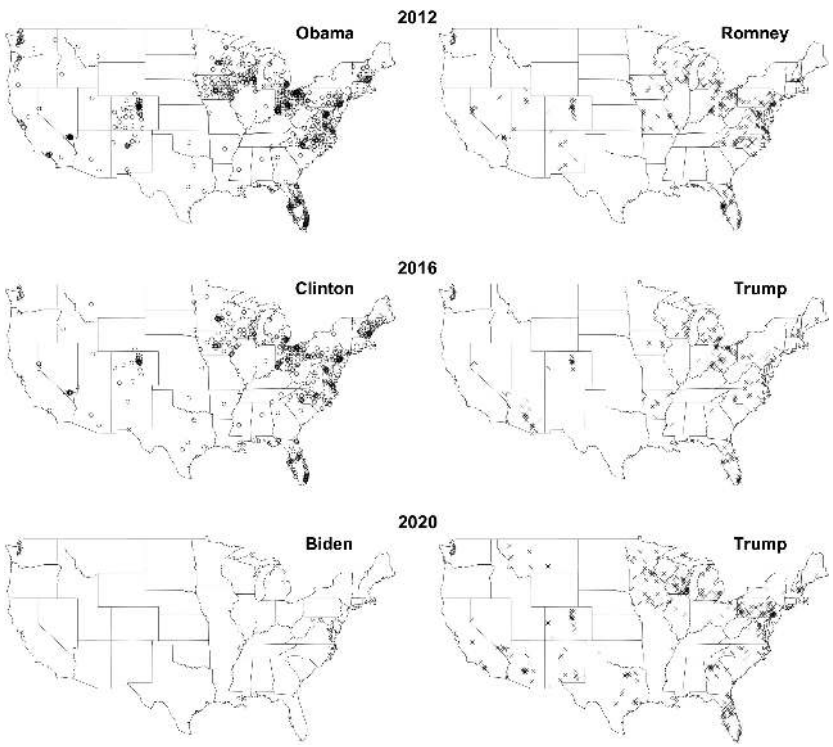


**Figure 1** Presidential campaign field offices, 2012–2020

Democratic areas where Obama also had an office, and the reverse was true for Obama' offices. In short, Romney's 2012 campaign placed offices according to a similar strategy as Obama on a smaller scale.

The Trump campaign in 2016 represented a step back for Republican field organizing efforts, though Trump's campaign was ultimately successful in a lower-turnout environment. Trump only opened 165 offices, over 100 fewer than Romney. Unlike Romney, who was more likely to open an office in swing counties, Trump avoided contested areas in 2016 (Darr 2020). Trump's website did not even list office locations publicly until October. Field offices appeared to be an afterthought, as the campaign pursued a weak base activation strategy in some swing states (Darr 2020; Panagopoulos 2016).

Once the candidates were decided and the nation faced an unprecedented pandemic, it was clear that 2020 would play out differently. Shortly after the national lockdown was instituted in mid-March 2020, Democratic frontrunner Joe Biden indefinitely suspended all in-person campaign activities, as did the joint campaign operation of the RNC and Trump Campaign (hereafter Trump Victory). Around mid-May, word was sent to the Trump campaigners that all

in-person campaign activities would start up again in June. Biden's campaign never opened a single field office.

The year 2020 represented a turning point for Republicans, with 319 Trump Victory offices – nearly double their number from 2016 – opening around the country. As we discuss in Section 2, Trump treated the Obama campaign as a "prototype" for victory and made the largest investment of any Republican campaign in the modern era (Kreiss 2016). Campaigns change course by adopting new tactics or shedding old ones following an election victory or defeat (Kreiss 2016). The next several elections will be crucial for determining whether voter contact goes digital or stays out in the field.

## 1.3 Offices Don't Vote

This recent history does not show that field offices are a "cheat code" for winning 270 electoral votes: Trump won with far fewer offices in 2016, then lost in 2020 to an opponent who opened none. While we offer evidence that storefront campaigning can be effective on the margins, we do not believe that offices alone make for a successful campaign or voter outreach strategy. The late-breaking, money-burning, ill-fated 2020 Democratic primary campaign of former New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg made that crystal clear.

After a fairly normal pre-caucuses process of opening offices and organizing, the nomination process began to crystallize after Joe Biden won the South Carolina primary on February 29. Buttigieg dropped out and endorsed Biden, as did Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar. Warren's campaign prospects were dim by that point after underwhelming performances in Iowa and New Hampshire, but she did not drop out. Biden staked his candidacy on South Carolina and only opened seven offices across all the Super Tuesday states. Sanders, on the other hand, was deeply invested in California, with more than twenty offices there alone, and opened many other offices in North Carolina, Texas, and Massachusetts.

None of these organizations could match the network of offices opened by latecomer billionaire Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York City, who declared his candidacy on November 19. After skipping all four early states, Bloomberg spent $500 million of his own money on his campaign, mostly concentrated on the Super Tuesday states. We found that Bloomberg's campaign opened eighty-six offices in those states, many more than his next closest competitor, Sanders (37). To build this organization quickly, Bloomberg paid his entry-level organizers the equivalent of a $72,000 annual salary, nearly double opposing campaigns' offer of around $42,000 (Ruiz 2020a), and promised (but later reneged on) job security through November regardless of whether Bloomberg won the nomination (Ruiz 2020b). T-shirts were free at his events,

which were often catered with wine and beer and "goat cheese puffs . . . honey coated brie, fig jam and gourmet flatbreads" (Ruiz 2020a). The offices were no less swanky, featuring "terrarium walls" and custom murals costing thousands of dollars (Ruiz 2020a; Thomson-Deveaux 2020).

Bloomberg's campaign was mobilized so quickly, however, that they never built a volunteer base and instead relied upon $18-an-hour paid canvassers recruited through job listings on Indeed (Thomson-Deveaux 2020). This lack of enthusiasm, and abundance of paid staffers, was captured well by Amelia Thomson-Deveaux of *FiveThirtyEight*, who reported on the Bloomberg campaign in California: "Each time I set off in search of Bloomberg supporters at events across Los Angeles, his press staff warned me to make sure I wasn't talking to a campaign employee" (Thomson-Deveaux 2020). As a definitive illustration that money alone cannot buy organization, it was revealed in December 2019 that a Bloomberg contractors used prison labor to call voters (Wamsley 2019).

After Bloomberg won only one contest, American Samoa, he folded his campaign the next day. His over-the-top outreach operation paid off with roughly 6 percent of the available delegates on Super Tuesday.

Through Biden, Trump, and Bloomberg, 2020 showed clearly that offices alone do not make an organization. As we discuss the benefits and drawbacks of storefront campaigning throughout the Element, we should be clear that storefronts are not a silver bullet for campaigns. Bloomberg had all the offices, none of the organization, and flamed out spectacularly. Biden's general election campaign had none of the offices and narrowly won, while Trump tried to recreate Obama's community organizing-based model at a smaller scale and lost.

## 1.4 Preview of the Element

We use a unique and original dataset of presidential campaign field office locations from the 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections to discern patterns of office placement; conduct analyses on the influence of office placement on voting and turnout; examine patterns of political participation and campaign contact using large-N nationwide surveys; and test for possible moderating factors of field office influence, such as geography, ideology, and other campaign activities. These analyses continue and expand upon previous work on campaign activities, presenting a thorough examination of the past decade and more of competition in the field by both Republicans and Democrats.

Section 2 connects the literature on campaigns and participation to the theory and practice of field offices. Field experiments from Yale University showing that door-knocking is the most effective way to increase turnout encouraged

campaigns to send volunteers to voters' doors (Gerber and Green 2000). More studies showed that personal and conversational voter contact was effective (Gerber et al. 2008; Issenberg 2012; Nickerson 2006), while others emphasized that targeting, effective scripts, and volunteer training are needed to reap the benefits (Bailey et al. 2016; Enos and Hersh 2015). We discuss how field offices empower campaigns to use these proven tactics most effectively while also bolstering staff morale and performance.

But where gets an office and where does not? In Section 3, we discuss the strategies behind office placement. Unfortunately for political scientists, campaigns do not randomly assign offices across all fifty states: they invest in strategically determined locations within the states they need to reach 270 electoral votes. This section builds on the placement analyses in Darr and Levendusky (2014) and Darr (2020), focusing on partisan, population-based, and competitive explanations for office placement at the national, state, and metropolitan levels. Using maps of strategically important metropolitan areas across recent cycles – Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Miami, and Las Vegas – we show how strategies vary across elections, even within the same cities. We expand upon previous work with analyses of the partisan breakdown of field office landlords and repeat use of spaces across cycles, as well as alternative explanations such as urban/rural breakdowns, local ideology (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014), and social capital (Chetty et al. 2022). These analyses and maps, combined with insights from our interviews with field staffers, provide the most thorough description yet of campaigns' geographic strategies for supporting volunteers and contacting voters.

Section 4 explores the kind of "forward progress" campaigns can expect from their ground game: small but potentially decisive given the incredibly close presidential elections of recent years. We update previous work on field office effects and add analyses that pool across elections (Darr and Levendusky 2014), quantifying whether field offices move votes and where Democratic and Republican offices might be more effective. We also examine moderating factors such as swing vs. core areas and urban vs. rural areas. Finally, using individual-level data from multiple waves of large-scale national surveys, we perform a multi-cycle "mechanism check" to show how field offices increase the prevalence of more personal methods such as door-knocking and phone calls.

In Section 5, we tackle the future of field. We discuss the unique circumstances of 2020, addressing what Biden's campaign did without field offices and how they used technological voter contact platforms and management systems to build community online. Having no general-election offices in 2020 was not the plan for Democrats, but the Biden campaign contacted millions of voters