

Who's That Knocking? A Study of the Strategic Choices Facing Large-Scale Grassroots Canvassing Efforts

Grant L. Ferguson¹, James G. Gimpel^{2,3,*}, Mark E. Owens⁴
and Daron R. Shaw⁵

¹Department of Political Science, Texas Christian University, 2855 Main Drive, Fort Worth, TX 76129, USA

²Department of Government, University of Maryland, College Park, 3140 Tydings Hall, College Park, MD 20742, USA

³Department of Political Science, United States Air Force Academy, 2354 Fairchild Drive, Suite 6K-164, Colorado Springs, CO 80840, USA

⁴Department of Political Science, The Citadel, 1 Lee Avenue, Charleston, SC 29409, USA

⁵Department of Government, University of Texas, Austin, 158 W. 21st Street, Stop A-1800, Austin, TX 78712, USA

*Corresponding author: Email: jgimpel@umd.edu

Abstract

Although recent political science research has established that face-to-face contacting mobilizes eligible citizens to vote, the emphasis on field experiments to facilitate causal inference has occasionally come at the expense of a deeper knowledge of how campaigns develop and implement canvassing and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) programs. We rely on a case study from a major statewide campaign in Texas to identify and explore the strategic considerations leading to the deployment of a large-scale paid field operation. Among the campaign management challenges in carrying out a statewide canvassing effort, we address the recruitment, retention, and supervision of canvassers; the choice of target neighborhoods and voters; the variable response of voters at the doorstep; setting and reaching performance goals; the timing of contacts; detailed recordkeeping; and the turnout results. In detailing this effort, we draw upon insights from interviews with staffers, field observations, and the campaign's detailed data on response at the doorstep for a target list of 2.5 million voters. In the end, we find that strategic decisions are myriad and complex, and that they almost certainly condition the impact of canvassing and GOTV operations.

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A burgeoning literature in political science describes and analyzes how American campaigns do (and do not) affect voter behavior.¹ This research has substantively

Grant L. Ferguson is Instructor II and Director of Outreach & Public Service Internships in the Department of Political Science at Texas Christian University, in Fort Worth, Texas. James G. Gimpel is Professor of Government at the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland; and Distinguished Visiting Professor of Political Science at the United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Mark E. Owens is Assistant Professor of Political Science at The Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina. Daron R. Shaw is University Distinguished Teaching Professor & Frank C. Erwin, Jr. Chair of State Politics, at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

¹ For recent summaries, see Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, "The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (2018): 148–66. Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

informed how aficionados, journalists, and attentive citizens think of campaigns, as well as how practitioners approach their craft. The answers to some important questions, however, remain elusive. For example, although there is a consensus that personalized forms of campaign outreach are more likely to be effective at either mobilizing or even persuading voters, there remains uncertainty about how campaigns should implement get-out-the-vote (GOTV) programs, especially at a truly expansive scale. Our research attempts to shed light on how a large-scale paid canvassing effort is accomplished. We use a case study of the 2022 Texas gubernatorial election, in which the Republican party's (a.k.a., GOP) campaign undertook extensive efforts to implement a door-knocking effort to reach more than 2 million low-turnout voters. We analyze these outreach efforts to better understand how campaigns implement strategies to change voters' rationale toward voting.

We begin with a simple observation that is often voiced but rarely explored: recruitment, deployment, and monitoring of canvassing personnel are major challenges for the successful implementation of large-scale grassroots campaigns. Much of the political science research in the early 2000s focused on unpaid volunteer workers, who were often contrasted with paid professional canvassers. This focus has shifted as researchers realized what campaigns have known for some time: purely volunteer canvassing efforts on a statewide basis are not realistic, given practical constraints. In fact, it is uncommon to see an all-volunteer effort on anything but a local scale. A review of the recent literature on canvassing shows that experimental research usually draws upon paid canvassers to deliver the stimulus, or at least some mix of paid and unpaid canvassers. But relatively little attention has been given to understanding how these efforts are assembled and how the attendant differences in the nature and scope of outreach might shape their effects on ordinary voters. In particular, it is perplexing—given the commitment of campaigns to paid outreach at the doorstep—how little we know about how campaigns decide on the optimal targets for contact and how they train, monitor, and supervise field staff.

We explore these strategic choices in context by looking at the 2022 re-election campaign of Texas governor Greg Abbott. Abbott's campaign outsourced its canvassing and GOTV effort to a group that relied heavily on well-trained, experienced, paid professional workers. In this sense, their effort represents a hybrid in which canvassers were highly motivated and adept at personal connection (i.e., unpaid volunteers) and were also reliable with respect to completing tasks and keeping records (i.e., paid professionals). The results of the effort examined here are intriguing but mixed, especially with respect to low-propensity voters, who are increasingly targeted by campaigns but about whom we know next to nothing.

Rediscovering Direct Voter Contact

Beginning in the 1960s, political campaigns in the United States emphasized communicating with voters through advertising on broadcast and, more recently, cable television and streaming subscriptions.² This approach came at the expense of

² Darrell M. West, *Air Wars: Television Advertising and Social Media in Election Campaigns, 1952-2016* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017).

more traditional, volunteer-based GOTV activities, such as door-to-door contacting and other forms of voter canvassing. But the pendulum began to swing back in the late 1990s, as labor unions—frustrated at being just one of any number of fundraising conduits for Democratic candidates—reinvested in person-to-person outreach.³ Notably, the success of the Democrats in the 1998 midterm elections⁴—in which the party had been expected to suffer losses after the impeachment of President Bill Clinton but instead gained seats—and the 2000 elections, were attributed by many to the massive voter mobilization efforts of labor unions.⁵

These lessons were not lost on practitioners and strategists, especially because they coincided with pioneering experimental studies of campaign outreach demonstrating that grassroots canvassing, more than any other electioneering effort, moves voters.⁶ The results of the accumulated research point to the superiority of “personal” forms of voter contact (e.g., door-to-door canvassing, live phone calls) over “impersonal” forms (e.g., direct mail, automated calls, email, media advertising), as instruments of voter mobilization. Many of these canvassing studies have been carried out in the context of nonpartisan campaigns, and others in cooperation with Democratic or liberal groups.⁷ Less knowledge has been accumulated about Republican outreach efforts, either from observational or experimental research.

Many canvassing studies have also been carried out on rather small scales as a matter of convenience and low cost. Most mobilization efforts involving canvassing are conducted in a few locations because that is all a campaign can readily plan and supervise. Large-scale canvassing across broad swaths of a state’s terrain is challenging because it is expensive and complicated.⁸ Even when canvassers are paid, motivated and diligent workers may still be hard to recruit; the work is

³ Dan Clawson and Mary Ann Clawson, “What Has Happened to the US Labor Movement? Union Decline and Renewal,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25, no. 1 (1999): 95–119.

⁴ Taylor E. Dark, “Labor and the Democratic Party: A Report on the 1998 Elections,” *Journal of Labor Research* 21, no. 4 (2000): 627–40.

⁵ Peter L. Francia, *The Future of Organized Labor in American Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). Daron R. Shaw, *The Race to 270: The Electoral College and the Campaign Strategies of 2000 and 2004* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁶ Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green. “Does Canvassing Increase Voter Turnout? A Field Experiment,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 96, no. 19 (1999): 10939–42. Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, “The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (2000): 653–63. Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, “Field Experiments on Voter Mobilization: An Overview of a Burgeoning Literature,” in *Handbook of Economic Field Experiments*, ed. Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee, Esther Duflo (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2017), 395–438. Kevin Arceneaux and David W. Nickerson. “Who Is Mobilized to Vote? A Re-analysis of 11 Field Experiments,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 1 (2009): 1–16. David Niven, “The Mobilization Solution? Face-to-Face Contact and Voter Turnout in a Municipal Election,” *The Journal of Politics* 66, no. 3 (2004): 868–84. Donald P. Green, Alan S. Gerber, and David W. Nickerson, “Getting Out the Vote in Local Elections: Results from Six Door-to-Door Canvassing Experiments,” *The Journal of Politics* 65, no. 4 (2003): 1083–96. Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Ron Shachar, “Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment,” *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (2003): 540–50. Jacob M. Grumbach, Hahrie Han, and Dorian T. Warren, “Getting Out the Vote in the Projects: Lessons from a Community Organizing Experiment,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 12, no. 1 (2024): 245–56. Charles L. Baum, and Mark F. Owens, “Does Personal Door-to-Door Campaigning Influence Voters? Evidence from a Field Experiment,” *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 105 (2023): 102043.

⁷ David W. Nickerson, “Volunteer Phone Calls Can Increase Turnout: Evidence from Eight Field Experiments,” *American Politics Research* 34, no. 3 (2006): 271–92. Joel A. Middleton and Donald P. Green, “Do Community-Based Voter Mobilization Campaigns Work Even in Battleground States? Evaluating the Effectiveness of MoveOn’s 2004 Outreach Campaign,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3 (2008): 63–82. Donald P. Green, Alan S. Gerber, and David W. Nickerson, “Getting Out the Vote in Local Elections.”

⁸ Ryan D. Enos and Anthony Fowler, “Aggregate Effects of Large-Scale Campaigns on Voter Turnout,” *Political Science Research and Methods* 6, no. 4 (2018): 733–51.

arduous and employees who take shortcuts or fail to follow outreach protocols may easily escape detection.⁹

Our research reveals how a campaign can implement a geographically comprehensive partisan canvassing operation across a vast state, rather than in just a few easy-to-walk neighborhoods on the edge of town. In other words, how does a campaign attract and use the “right kind” of volunteers? The significance of such a study is readily apparent: we need to know more about how GOTV programs are developed because they are a crucial part of contemporary American campaigns. At the risk of oversimplifying, there are two models for canvassing and GOTV. In the first, campaigns have unpaid volunteers develop and clean lists of registered voters as part of their training and development. These volunteers then go into the field and talk to voters with the intent of building rapport and credibility, often having real conversations with contacts at the doorstep. In the second, campaigns use the voter file for targeting and rely on campaign workers to canvass those individuals identified from that file, but time-consuming personal engagement with voters is not planned. Impressionistic evidence suggests that unpaid volunteers are more successful than paid workers when the first model is used, whereas there is no difference when the second model is used. Our study provides insight by analyzing a hybrid approach: the Abbott campaign contracted with a consulting company that uses canvassers trained with outreach experience from mission work with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to contact large numbers of voters identified from the voter file (more on this in the section “The Camelback Strategy Group and Principal-Agent Challenges”).

Our view is that increased knowledge of how GOTV programs are developed and implemented will help us understand why randomized controlled trials testing the effects of outreach may not work. Put another way, the failure of some randomized controlled trials may be due to a weak treatment or message, or it may be because of poor quality control at the level of implementation. The experimenter can easily lose control of the stimulus, and of precise recordkeeping, when the field is expansive and the project involves a large workforce. We need to know more about how GOTV programs are set up and executed if we are to assess properly either the external validity of our experimental research or the true reasons for null findings.

In addition, we need to know more about campaign outreach that targets voters who are otherwise very unlikely to cast a ballot: the low propensity voters. The lion’s share of research demonstrates how canvassing and GOTV efforts move people already predisposed to vote, but very little focuses on the effectiveness of targeting and mobilizing those least predisposed to vote.¹⁰ Given that (1) most campaigns now are about mobilization and (2) campaigns have already figured out how to identify and reach voters who are basically “low hanging fruit,”¹¹ the most pressing question is whether peripheral voters or perennial nonvoters

⁹ Allan Smith, “Republicans Are Spending Millions on Turnout Operations that Are Deeply Flawed, Insiders Say,” *NBC News*, 1 June 2023. Accessed 9 September 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/republicans-are-spending-millions-turnout-operations-are-deeply-flawed-rcna74920>. Taylor Kinsley Chewning, Jon Green, Hans JG Hassell, and Matthew R. Miles, “Campaign Principal-Agent Problems: Volunteers as Faithful and Representative Agents,” *Political Behavior* 46, no. 1 (2024): 405–26. Eitan D. Hersh, *Hacking the Electorate: How Campaigns Perceive Voters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Ryan D. Enos and Eitan D. Hersh, “Party Activists as Campaign Advertisers: The Ground Campaign as a Principal-Agent Problem,” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (2015): 252–78.

¹⁰ Grumbach, Han, and Warren, “Getting Out the Vote in the Projects.”

¹¹ Costas Panagopoulos, *Bases Loaded: How US Presidential Campaigns Are Changing and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

can be mobilized by concerted contacting efforts. This is precisely what the Abbott campaign was trying to do in 2022.

In focusing on this goal, we describe the operational challenges of fielding large-scale grassroots campaigns, with an eye toward ascertaining whether these complex and costly efforts generate higher turnout. Though this latter analysis is correlational, our results suggest that canvassing exerted a modest positive impact among voters with irregular participation histories. By examining the results of contacting against the turnout records in the 2022 general election, we are also able to comment on the timing of contact, the number of contacts, and geographic variation in field organization, implementation, and results. In presenting and analyzing observational data, we contribute to an understanding of how voter mobilization efforts actually proceed in the field; in so doing, we follow in the footsteps of a handful of other voter outreach studies.¹² Given this approach, we also realize the need to be as forthright as possible about the data and design. Perhaps most notably, because assignment to contact is not random in this study, we include detailed information about the canvasser, as well as the timing and location of contact, to minimize spurious and biased estimates of impact.

Paid Canvassers versus Relying on Volunteers

Upon review, an impressive number of studies on political canvassing have involved paid workers of a research team, campaign, party, activist group, or a canvassing firm.¹³ These studies identify canvassers as paid employees, though perhaps not “professionals,” and indicate that they are usually hired on a temporary basis. They also observe that, sometimes, paid canvassers are fielded alongside volunteer efforts, though typically not as a substitute for them.¹⁴ Although contemporary research has sometimes criticized modern campaigns for turning away from strictly voluntary efforts,¹⁵ volunteers may be unsuitable for certain demanding campaign tasks. That is not to say that campaigns are regularly hiring

¹² Betsy Sinclair, Margaret McConnell, and Melissa R. Michelson, “Local Canvassing: The Efficacy of Grassroots Voter Mobilization,” *Political Communication* 30, no. 1 (2013): 45. Marisa Abrajano, Taylor N. Carlson, Lisa Garcia Bedolla, Stan Oklobdzija, and Shad Turney, “When Campaigns Call, Who Answers? Using Observational Data to Enrich Our Understanding of Phone Mobilization,” *Electoral Studies* 64 (2020): 102025. Weihao Li, J. Ryan Lamare, and Robert Bruno, “Does Union Canvassing Affect Voter Turnout Under Conditions of Political Constraint? Empirical Evidence from Illinois,” *Labor Studies Journal* 47, no. 3 (2022): 213–240. Gerald H. Kramer, “The Effects of Precinct-Level Canvassing on Voter Behavior,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1970): 560–72.

¹³ On payment for canvassing see: Gerber and Green, “The Effects of Canvassing,” 655; Gerber, Green, and Shachar, “Voting Can Be Habit Forming,” 544; Green, Gerber, and Nickerson, “Getting Out the Vote in Local Elections,” 1087–88; Melissa R. Michelson, “Getting Out the Latino Vote: How Door-to-Door Canvassing Influences Voter Turnout in Rural Central California,” *Political Behavior* 25 (2003): 250; Kevin Arceneaux, “I’m Asking for Your Support: The Effects of Personally Delivered Campaign Messages on Voting Decisions and Opinion Formation,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (2007): 48; Kevin Arceneaux and David W. Nickerson, “Who Is Mobilized to Vote?”; J. Ryan Lamare, “Labor Unions and Political Mobilization: Diminishing Returns of Repetitious Contact,” *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society* 55, no. 2 (2016): 354; Middleton and Green, “Do Community-Based Voter Mobilization Campaigns Work,” 63; and David W. Nickerson, Ryan D. Friedrichs, and David C. King, “Partisan Mobilization Campaigns in the Field: Results from a Statewide Turnout Experiment in Michigan,” *Political Research Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2006): 90.

¹⁴ Elizabeth McKenna and Hahrie Han, *Groundbreakers: How Obama’s 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Dana Fisher, *Activism, Inc.: How the Outsourcing of Grassroots Campaigns Is Strangling Progressive Politics in America*. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). Donald P. Green and Jennifer K. Smith, “Professionalization of Campaigns and the Secret History of Collective Action Problems,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 15, no. 3 (2003): 321–39. Robert Kleidman, “Volunteer Activism and Professionalism in Social Movement Organizations,” *Social Problems* 41, no. 2 (1994): 257–76.

professional firms to carry out canvassing operations, just that they are in the habit of paying canvassers as an incentive to complete the work. A few research reports have explicitly expressed doubts about volunteer effectiveness.¹⁶ This is rare, however, because in some venues of social science research and political commentary, volunteers are regarded as “sacred,” so much so that it is unusual that their value and limitations are questioned.¹⁷

From the perspective of the campaign, vexing practical problems center on the selection of volunteers for specific roles, the undersupply of volunteers in some locations, the reliability of a volunteer labor force, and the need for orientation and training. Pitching in to help a political candidate seems like a simple thing to do, but it is hard to channel these efforts into scalable effective voter contact, phone banking, and canvassing, to say nothing of fundraising, digital media operations, and more complex tasks. Though it is common for academic studies to suggest that professionalization undercuts volunteers,¹⁸ veteran campaign managers view the causation as running in reverse: as fewer volunteers have been willing to step forward, campaigns have had to staff these positions by paying wages and salaries. The turn to paid grassroots outreach efforts has had to replace the reliance on volunteers because the supply of the latter has been drained away by a complex of socioeconomic and cultural forces.¹⁹

Social science research has also pointed out that the supply of volunteer labor is uneven across locations for a variety of reasons not in a campaign’s control.²⁰ Students of nonprofit management have noted a troubling change in the quality of the volunteer workforce that is also observable in political campaigning. The hours volunteers are willing to dedicate to unpaid work has decreased dramatically over time, giving rise to doubts about their commitment to long-term efforts and more complex tasks where learning and experience are beneficial. Put succinctly, large-scale campaigns need more out of volunteers than they are now willing or able to give.²¹

¹⁶ David W. Nickerson, “Quality Is Job One: Professional and Volunteer Voter Mobilization Calls,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 2 (2007): 269–82.

¹⁷ Marc A. Musick, and John Wilson, *Volunteers: A Social Profile* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007). Susan Eckstein, “Community as Gift-Giving: Collectivistic Roots of Volunteerism,” *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 6 (2001): 829–51. Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” In *Culture and Politics: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000): 223–34. John Wilson, “Volunteering,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 215–40. Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹⁸ On nonprofit volunteering: John McKnight, *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterparts* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). On social movements: Kleidman, “Volunteer Activism.” Fisher, *Activism Inc.*

¹⁹ Robert D. Putnam, “Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28, no. 4 (1995): 664–83. Helmut K. Anheier and Lester M. Salamon, “Volunteering in Cross-National Perspective: Initial Comparisons,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 62 (1999): 43. Matthew A. Painter and Pamela Paxton, “Checkbooks in the Heartland: Change over Time in Voluntary Association Membership,” *Sociological Forum*, 29, no. 2, (2014): 408–28.

²⁰ Thomas Rotolo and John Wilson, “Social Heterogeneity and Volunteering in US Cities,” *Sociological Forum*, 29, no. 2 (2014): 429–52. Young-joo Lee and Jeffrey L. Brudney, “Participation in Formal and Informal Volunteering: Implications for Volunteer Recruitment,” *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 23, no. 2 (2012): 159–80.

²¹ Laura Tiehen, “Has Working More Caused Married Women to Volunteer Less? Evidence from Time Diary Data, 1965 to 1993,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2000): 505–29. Jeffrey L. Brudney and Lucas CPM Meijjs, “It Ain’t Natural: Toward a New (Natural) Resource Conceptualization for Volunteer Management,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2009): 564–81. Hillary J. Knepper, Maria J. D’Agostino, and Helisse Levine, “Volunteer Management Practices during Challenging Economic Times,” *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy* 20, no. 2 (2015): 7.

The prevalence of paid voter contact for mobilization is not new. In fact, it dates back as far as the nineteenth century²² and increased significantly over the course of the twentieth century.²³ Paid phone banks have been available since the 1960s for soliciting donations, reminding voters to vote, arranging their transport to the polling place, or helping them acquire a mail-in ballot. The history of door-to-door canvassing is probably as old as democratic elections: it is the original way voter contact was carried out. However, reliance on paid, rather than volunteer, canvassing for reaching large numbers of voters is a relatively recent development.²⁴

By “paid,” we do not mean machine party politics whereby precinct and ward leaders were appointed and paid by local political bosses, and, occasionally, even voters were paid!²⁵ Rather, we mean paid field operations carried out by short-term employees of the campaign or by consultants, who hire workers and supervise the contacting, organizing the door-to-door outreach on behalf of campaigns. Hired canvassing has faced serious criticism for being less effective than purely volunteer efforts because paid employees do not have the commitment levels of volunteers. Problems documented in one of the larger Democratic paid canvassing operations included difficult working conditions, low morale, nonlocal supervision, and high turnover.²⁶ The failure of paid-worker contact with voters discussed in several influential studies suggests it is a suboptimal outreach strategy.²⁷

The upshot is that campaigns face a confounding lacuna: how to achieve the face-to-face contacting required to move the massive numbers of voters necessary to win elections? Answering this conundrum is especially relevant in large and populous states, such as California, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Texas, where even an aggressive volunteer canvassing program is unlikely to be enough to reach a requisite share of the electorate. The results that follow, based on a Texas effort, shed light on the broader issue of campaign strategy and execution.

The 2022 Texas Gubernatorial Election

The race for Texas governor in 2022 saw two well-funded and aggressive campaigns invest substantial effort to reach voters in a state with a fast-growing population. Greg Abbott, the Republican incumbent, was running for a third term in 2022 and was relying on a well-oiled campaign operation that had been continuously maintained and improved since his initial election in 2014. The Democratic

²² J. Alun Thomas, “The system of Registration and the Development of Party Organisation, 1832–1870,” *History* 35, no. 123/124 (1950): 81–98.

²³ William C. Adams and Dennis J. Smith, “Effects of Telephone Canvassing on Turnout and Preferences: A Field Experiment,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1980): 389–95.

²⁴ Hahrie Han and Elizabeth McKenna, “The Untilled Field of Field Campaigns,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 3 (2016): 750–57. McKenna and Han, *Groundbreakers*. Caroline W. Lee, *Do-It-Yourself Democracy: The Rise of the Public Engagement Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Edward T. Walker, *Grassroots for Hire: Public Affairs Consultants in American Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Fisher, *Activism Inc.*

²⁵ Jac C. Heckelman, “The Effect of the Secret Ballot on Voter Turnout Rates,” *Public Choice* 82, no. 1 (1995): 107–24. James Q. Wilson, “The Economy of Patronage,” *Journal of Political Economy* 69, no. 4 (1961): 369–80. V.O. Key Jr., *Techniques of political graft in the United States*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1935).

²⁶ Fisher, *Activism Inc.*

²⁷ Gerber and Green, “The Effects of Canvassing.” John E. McNulty, “Phone-Based GOTV—What’s on the Line? Field Experiments with Varied Partisan Components, 2002–2003,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 601, no. 1 (2005): 41–65.

challenger was a former U.S. representative from El Paso and 2020 presidential candidate, Robert Francis “Beto” O’Rourke. The 2022 election marked O’Rourke’s return to a ballot for statewide office after challenging incumbent U.S. Senator Ted Cruz in 2018. Although many voters were familiar with both candidates, Texas’s explosive growth put a premium on canvassing and GOTV efforts in the race. For example, by 2022, the state had added 3.15 million registrants since 2014, meaning that the Texas electorate was 22 percent larger than it was for Abbott’s first gubernatorial run.²⁸

This study focuses on Abbott’s campaign efforts.²⁹ The same general management team that ran Abbott’s first two campaigns remained in place for the 2022 contest. Although Abbott had won his previous elections by 13 and 20 points, respectively, he had faced Democratic opponents running their first statewide election campaigns. In 2022, however, all early indications were that O’Rourke would be a more formidable contender, both in his ability to raise money and in the sophistication of his campaign planning.³⁰ Though Republicans had maintained an edge in party identification and fundraising in Texas, the inability of either Rick Perry (2002, 2006, 2010) or Greg Abbott (2014, 2018) to muster 60 percent or more of the vote suggested the state was close enough that major offices were not out of Democratic reach. These considerations convinced the Abbott campaign that nothing should be taken for granted. They had to take O’Rourke seriously and mount a professional, multifront effort to secure reelection.

Part of this effort involved the design of a grassroots contacting program of unprecedented size. By early 2022, Texas was the second most populous state in the nation (29.5 million residents), with slightly less than 17 million registered voters. Five of the top twenty largest U.S. cities are situated in Texas (Houston, Dallas, Austin, Fort Worth, and San Antonio). The state also covers a massive land mass: 268,500 square miles—larger than France and more than twice as large as Germany. According to established campaign practice, most Texas statewide campaigns focus their attention on 40 of the state’s 254 counties. These counties contain about 84 percent of the state’s population and are largely situated in what is known as “Central Texas” or the triangular region between San Antonio, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Houston (although El Paso, in faraway West Texas, is of significant size and is included as well).

Fully aware of the research on the effectiveness of personal outreach in general and door-knocking in particular, and mindful of the O’Rourke campaign’s grassroots strength in 2018, campaign management launched the most aggressive field operation in Texas state history. The Abbott team believed that O’Rourke had the potential to boost lackluster Democratic turnout and realize the longstanding goal of “turning Texas blue” (i.e., majority Democrat). More specifically, they believed that if O’Rourke could mobilize Democratic loyalists in densely populated locations, especially Houston, Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, and El Paso, and throughout the multicounty area along the border called the Rio Grande Valley (which includes the cities of Brownsville, McAllen, and Harlingen), the race not only

²⁸ See figures for turnout and voter registration from the Texas Secretary of State’s office at <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/70-92.shtml> (accessed 6 May 2024).

²⁹ We reached out to the O’Rourke campaign but were politely rebuffed.

³⁰ The final general election vote was 55 percent for Abbott, 44 percent for O’Rourke, though some polls taken during summer 2022 showed the race within 5 and 7 points. See full polling results at <https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2022/governor/tx/texas-governor-abbott-vs-orourke-7376.html>.

would be much closer than previous ones, the Democrats could win the governorship. The O'Rourke campaign certainly faced big challenges of its own, and, in hindsight, much of what his campaign promised in terms of field effort was never brought to fruition. But no one sees the result from the beginning or middle, so the Abbott campaign's concern about the prospects for high Democratic turnout made sense.

At the same time, Texas's sheer size meant that any serious field operation would have to set a very high target for total contacts. For instance, with 17 million voters on the voter file, and 55 percent of them turning out to vote, that means nearly 10 million active and engaged voters may cast ballots. To expect to move the result by even one or two percentage points means that tens of thousands of voters would have to be added to one side or the other through grassroots contact. A spotty effort of a few hundred here, a thousand there, would not be worthwhile.

Based on our conversations with Abbott campaign officials, we learned that in 2014 and 2018, the campaign had adopted some aggressive door-knocking goals but found it difficult to manage the effort at scale. If the campaign workers were available as some mix of hired and volunteer labor, they were difficult to supervise. For instance, monitoring compliance with outreach goals was always challenging. When campaign workers could be supervised, it was still difficult to gather data to audit the effort for purposes of confident evaluation.

This experience led to the decision to outsource the face-to-face mobilization effort in 2022. By outsourcing the grassroots contacting effort, the campaign would free itself of a significant operational burden; ensure that more of the state could be canvassed, adding more total contacts; and guarantee that comprehensive data could be gathered for evaluation purposes later. It might even cost less to have the effort outsourced to specialists rather than to try to manage it from campaign headquarters.

The Camelback Strategy Group and Principal-Agent Challenges

After choosing to hire an outside group to oversee door-to-door canvassing and GOTV activities, the campaign still had to decide on a specific firm. Five organizations specializing in grassroots outreach were invited to submit bids, and three ultimately submitted proposals. Camelback Strategy Group, a company launched in 2016 and headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia (with satellite offices in Phoenix, Arizona, and Dallas, Texas) was ultimately selected as the winning bidder.³¹ According to officials from the Abbott campaign, Camelback was selected because its leadership took several creative approaches to solving the typical principal-agent shirking problems campaigns face as they carried out fieldwork.³² The firm's principals were all westerners and had met through work in previous campaigns. Two of them had roots in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (hereafter, the Church),³³ which has a substantial congregational presence in Arizona and other western states. This background in the Church proved fortuitous

³¹ "Camelback" refers to Camelback Mountain, a dominant feature of the local landscape in Maricopa County (Phoenix), Arizona.

³² Chewning et al., "Campaign Principal-Agent Problems."

³³ The term "Mormon Church" has been widely applied to the Church as a byword but is not consistent with the Church's preference, as detailed in their communications manual of style; nor is the abbreviation "LDS" authorized for official use. See <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/style-guide>; accessed 24 September 2024.

for understanding the mechanics of effective organization and operation of door-to-door field work, because part of the Church's missionary work consists of these activities. Relatedly, Camelback's use of former missionaries offered a solution to recruitment and training issues and made the prospect of extensive outreach more realistic. This promise, plus the commitment to data collection, auditing, and evaluation, sealed the deal.

By way of brief background, young men in the Church who are between the ages of 18 and 25 years are expected to serve as missionaries. Women, starting at the age of 19 years, are encouraged to serve and have become an increasing share of the total number of missionaries. Before they are sent into the field, the participants go through communications training and, depending on where they serve, learn a foreign language. The missionaries are often qualified based on their self-discipline, honesty, and moral uprightness, and supervision during the period of service ensures that rules for work, dress, and behavior are kept. A regionally based hierarchy of management ensures that the mission's stated goals are carried out efficiently in designated locations.

Given this fitting preparation, former missionaries would seem to be prized recruits for a grassroots political canvassing operation. Yet, campaign operatives lacking knowledge about missionary activity would likely miss the suitability of this specialized labor pool. Camelback's executives, by contrast, immediately saw the Church's youth as an essential and untapped resource. They arrive on day one already coached and are familiar and comfortable meeting and communicating with new contacts. Moreover, they tend to be honest and committed to task fulfillment—highly desired qualifications of any employee, for any job.

Of course, only certain types of personalities are drawn to doing campaign work in the first place, and not all of those who try will excel.³⁴ Having a supply of good recruits streaming from mission work does not mean that everyone hired for the Texas fieldwork had this background, nor did every hire work out. At its peak, campaign officials reported that Camelback employed 1,200 canvassers just in Texas alone, but there was substantial churn in the labor pool. Management estimates suggested that only around 5 percent of canvassers statewide were former missionaries, though these recruits were often placed in critical roles, filling about 10 percent of supervisory positions.

As suggested previously, exploiting this natural advantage in recruitment and training gave Camelback an edge over rival firms, one that seemed particularly important given the unique challenges of door-to-door work in the Lone Star state. Former missionaries are accustomed to meeting strangers and working long hours outdoors, standing and walking. Grassroots canvassing is difficult work and, in the heat of a Texas summer, can be quite unpleasant. When temperatures rise in spring and summer, knocking on doors under the pressure of a daily quota will put even stalwart canvassers to the test. Post-election reports from other southwestern states in 2022 suggested many canvassers in other high-profile contests did not fulfill their assigned tasks.³⁵ Paid workers in Nevada seemed especially problematic: uneven monitoring in the field meant that canvassers did not actually canvass, with reports of some sitting in casinos while they were supposed to be knocking on

³⁴ Hans JG Hassell, "It's Who's on the Inside that Counts: Campaign Practitioner Personality and Campaign Electoral Integrity." *Political Behavior* 42, no. 4 (2020): 1119–142.

³⁵ Smith, "Republicans Are Spending Millions."

doors throughout Clark County (Las Vegas metro). Faced with the pressure to meet daily targets, some employees falsified their daily activity reports; if caught, these workers had to be fired and replaced, consuming valuable time while the work remained incomplete.³⁶ Even given their reliance on a relatively expert group of paid workers, Camelback's proposal called for monitoring and auditing all reported contacts. This plan included early trials in a pilot program for the Texas Republican primary in March 2022.

The ongoing information feedback loop mattered for the Abbott campaign. Their experience gave those in the campaign a clear sense of the pitfalls and challenges of a major door-to-door effort. Any firm expected to take up this contract had to have its eyes wide open to the possibility of fraud, along with compliance monitoring and data collection protocols that would ensure the program's objectives were reached. The Abbott campaign manager, Dave Carney, was notoriously suspicious of campaign vendors for promising but not delivering. When running Rick Perry's reelection campaigns in 2006 and 2010, he commissioned academic studies of campaign outreach, subjecting several vendors' services to the rigor of randomized controlled trials. Important campaign decisions were made based on the findings, saving money by cancelling ineffective outreach plans. In response to these and other tests he had studied in the literature, Carney had long insisted that all the campaign's vendors collect thorough data and maintain transparent operations accessible to inspection by campaign personnel. Because of this emphasis, the Abbott team was able to make upfront, informed evaluations of what they were going to get in return for their investments. In short, Camelback's bid was successful both because of the specific plan as well as their agreement to include measurable metrics for their program.

Setting Campaign Mobilization Targets

So, just what was the scope of the grassroots effort, and who were the campaign's target contacts? Carney concluded early in the 2022 cycle that campaigns had been wasting too much effort contacting voters who were going to turn out to vote even without contact. These highly motivated voters are sometimes called "hell or high water" voters. Alternatively, they are referred to as "8 of 8" or "10 of 10" voters—those have participated in each of the last eight (or ten) primary and general elections without fail. The vote histories recorded on the voter file offer a clear indication of how active someone has been at their current place of residence. They are knowledgeable, sophisticated, and highly partisan. Presumably, contacting adds nothing to their awareness of an approaching election or their motivation to vote. On the other hand, those with spotty vote histories are a different story. Provided they have not missed elections due to age ineligibility, or from a change in residence, an uneven turnout record suggests someone who could most benefit from a doorstep reminder to vote. If they are reminded to vote, especially near election day, such contact could be the difference between voting and abstention.

Accordingly, Abbott's campaign data team set about prioritizing voters for contact who were of middling-to-low voting propensity, removing from the list the most recurrent voters. The voter files included not only information on where voters were registered, when they registered, and in which elections they had voted,

³⁶ Smith, "Republicans Are Spending Millions." Hassell, "It's Who's on the Inside."

but also basic demographic information, such as gender and age, as well as statistically modeled estimates of race/ethnicity, education, income, and veteran status. Statistical models were also used to derive inexact estimates of likely partisan vote choice, political ideology, and issue positions on guns and abortion. Turnout likelihood was calculated in a straightforward manner using vote history columns from the voter file, adjusting for age and registration date. From the vote history items (coded 0 = did not vote or was not registered, or 1 = voted), participation propensities can be estimated for every voter based on the number of previous primary and/or general elections in which they could have participated given their age. The age adjustment is necessary because a voter who is 20 years old cannot possibly have an extensive vote history. If a 20-year-old registrant lacks vote history for elections four, six, or more years ago, it is obviously due to their age ineligibility, not a decision to abstain. Like many other approximations, these measures are more accurate at the extremes than in the middle: ten for ten indicates complete engagement, whereas zero for ten indicates complete lack of engagement, but casting three, four, or five votes encompasses a wide range of engagement possibilities. For 2022, Texas voters with highly regular vote histories were not contacted, leaving only the harder targets.

The campaign also sought to contact voters who were not clearly identifiable Republicans but were not committed Democrats. Texas does not register voters by party, but party loyalty can be inferred for up to 20 percent of voters by examining their primary voting history (i.e., whether they participated in Republican or Democratic primaries). The campaign also chose not to focus door-to-door outreach on obvious Republican partisans, who were also eliminated from the contact list. Instead, the targets included those considered “purple” (i.e., persuadable or undecided) by virtue of living in neighborhoods exhibiting partisan heterogeneity, and those with less predictable involvement in primary elections. Hispanic voters were also included as targets for contact, particularly in neighborhoods nested in the Rio Grande Valley counties along the border. These locations were risky because they are known to vote Democratic by lopsided margins. But Hispanics moved slightly toward the Republican party in South Texas in 2016 and 2020, and unbeknownst to anyone at the time, would do so in the 2024 presidential race as well. If a well-focused outreach effort could convert and mobilize some share of Hispanics in the mid-term election, it might reinforce an apparent trend and capitalize on the progress.

In sum, the Abbott campaign chose to exclude (1) those with a high probability of voting who did not need to be reminded to vote, and (2) those who were very likely to vote for the opposition. The description of the resulting contacts file developed by Abbott’s data specialists appears in [Table 1](#). Of the 16,878,671 who had registered by the October closing date, 2,628,001 were included on the target list, about 15.6 percent of the entire Texas electorate.

Voter and Geographic Focus of the Contact List

The descriptive data shown in [Table 1](#) summarize who the campaign intended to contact and how these contacts differed from those excluded. As expected, voters on the contact list were less likely to have voted in either the 2022 Republican (5.8 percent contact; 12.8 percent balance of state) or Democratic (3.3 percent contact; 7.3 percent balance of state) primaries. Other distinctive characteristics of those on

Table 1. Grassroots Contacts List Compared with Balance of Voter File for the 2022 Texans for Greg Abbott Campaign

Demographics and Other Characteristics	Contact Targets (<i>n</i> = 2,682,001)	Balance of Texas (<i>n</i> = 14,250,715)
Age, mean % (years)		
18-24	9.4	10.4
25-30	7.7	8.9
55-64	16.3	15.9
65-74	11.4	13.2
≥75	7.8	9.1
Hispanic (surname), mean %	30.8	23.0
Voting history, mean %^a		
Early/absentee voter 2020	41.9	58.2
Republican primary 2022	5.8	12.8
Democratic primary 2022	3.3	7.3
Democrat-leaning zip codes 2016-2022 (%)	48.2	45.8
Republican-leaning zip codes 2016-2022 (%)	51.8	54.2
Modeled characteristics, mean %		
Social Conservatives	5.0	5.9
Veterans	1.4	1.6
2nd Amendment rights	0.8	1.2
Larger counties (region), % of total		
Harris (Houston)	18.0	14.4
Dallas (Dallas-Fort Worth)	5.7	8.3
Bexar (San Antonio)	7.4	6.8
Travis (Austin)	1.8	5.5
Tarrant (Dallas-Fort Worth)	0.8	0.4
El Paso (El Paso)	6.9	2.1
Montgomery (Houston)	2.5	2.3
Fort Bend (Houston)	1.8	3.2
Galveston (Houston)	1.7	1.2
Brazoria (Houston)	1.0	1.4
Collin (Dallas-Fort Worth)	4.1	3.8
Denton (Dallas-Fort Worth)	1.7	3.7
Rockwall (Dallas-Fort Worth)	0.5	0.4
Cameron (Rio Grande Valley)	3.0	1.0
Hidalgo (Rio Grande Valley)	4.1	2.1
Starr (Rio Grande Valley)	0.5	0.1
Smith (Tyler)	0.9	0.9
Lubbock (Lubbock)	1.9	0.9
Nueces (Corpus Christi)	2.8	1.0
Midland (Midland)	0.8	0.5
Bell (Killeen, Temple)	1.6	1.2
Brazos (Bryan)	1.0	0.6
McLennan (Waco)	1.9	0.7

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Demographics and Other Characteristics	Contact Targets (<i>n</i> = 2,682,001)	Balance of Texas (<i>n</i> = 14,250,715)
Hays (Austin)	0.3	1.0
Jefferson (Beaumont)	1.2	0.8
Sum of 25 counties listed	73.9	64.3

Source: Texas State Voter File and TGA [Texans for Greg Abbott] Voter Contacts List.
^aUnless otherwise indicated.

the contact list merit mention. The targets were much less likely to vote early or absentee in the 2020 presidential election (41.9 percent contact; 58.2 percent balance of state). They were also more likely to live in Democratic-leaning zip codes (48.2 percent contact; 45.8 percent balance of state) and also less likely to live in Republican-leaning ones (51.8 percent contact; 54.2 percent balance of state). On basic demographics, the contact list was slightly younger than the balance of Texas. About 31.8 percent of the contact list was of Hispanic ancestry, compared with only 23.0 percent of those not included.

Although the contacting program was expansive, the target list concentrated on voters in major metropolitan and suburban areas rather than the most peripheral corners of the state. For instance, 18 percent of all contacts were situated in Harris County (Houston), compared with 14.4 percent for those excluded from contact. Though there was a smaller percentage in Travis (Austin), Dallas (Dallas) and Tarrant (Fort Worth) on the contact list than perfect representation would require, there were more contacts in Bexar (San Antonio), El Paso (El Paso), and in the Rio Grande Valley locations (Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr counties). On the edge of Houston, the campaign focused greater attention on Montgomery and Galveston counties than on Fort Bend. Taken together, the 25 counties identified in [Table 1](#) contributed 74 percent of the total voters on the contact list but only 64 percent of those excluded from contact.

A few broader points can be gleaned from [Table 1](#). Perhaps most importantly, selection for contact was not random, nor would it make sense for a partisan campaign to try to mobilize voters randomly. No campaign has as its goal the maximization of turnout of the other candidate’s loyalists, although anytime one includes weaker partisans or more marginal voters, there is some risk of turning out opponents. Nor do campaigns need to dedicate precious resources to reminding their most reliable supporters to vote. However, excluding the most regular voters from the contacting program inevitably colors the results from contact. For instance, voters on the contact list will likely turn out at lower rates than those excluded from the list, even with contact, because they were selected as lower-propensity voters in the first place. To what extent canvassing makes up for the causes of intermittent voting is part of what we are trying to assess. Put another way, there should be no expectation that door-knocking will entirely erase the drag of the various other causes of low turnout unrelated to reminding people to vote. We know from previous research that many people fail to vote for reasons

Table 2. General Election Turnout Rate of Voters on Grassroots Contacts List Compared with Balance of Voter File for the 2022 Texans for Greg Abbott Campaign^a

Demographics and Other Voter Characteristics	Voted, % ^a	
	Contact Targets	Balance of Texas
Total casting ballots, no.	898,560	7,136,297
On contact list	34.2	
Not on contact list		48.2
Demographics		
Age, years		
18-24	19.9	24.3
25-30	21.7	29.0
55-64	41.1	61.8
65-74	42.2	69.8
≥75	32.1	63.6
Hispanic (surname)	30.9	38.0
Voting history^b		
Early/absentee voter 2020	61.1	69.8
Republican primary 2022	76.2	87.6
Democratic primary 2022	80.3	80.0
Democrat-leaning zip codes 2016-2022, %	46.7	43.2
Republican-leaning zip codes 2016-2022, %	53.3	56.8
Modeled characteristics		
Social Conservatives	51.7	76.1
Veterans	41.4	71.8
2nd Amendment rights	52.7	80.7
Larger counties (region)		
Harris (Houston)	35.1	43.9
Dallas (Dallas-Fort Worth)	32.1	46.5
Bexar (San Antonio)	32.8	47.4
Travis (Austin)	38.8	53.5
Tarrant (Dallas-Fort Worth)	33.6	50.0
El Paso (El Paso)	31.6	34.9
Montgomery (Houston)	39.4	52.0
Fort Bend (Houston)	46.9	48.9
Galveston (Houston)	34.8	51.3
Brazoria (Houston)	34.1	48.9
Collin (Dallas-Fort Worth)	42.8	55.1
Denton (Dallas-Fort Worth)	41.6	53.9
Rockwall (Dallas-Fort Worth)	36.6	56.3
Cameron (Rio Grande Valley)	36.3	33.9
Hidalgo (Rio Grande Valley)	35.8	34.4
Starr (Rio Grande Valley)	41.6	33.1
Smith (Tyler)	27.5	54.6
Lubbock (Lubbock)	31.6	50.3
Nueces (Corpus Christi)	26.5	47.3
Midland (Midland)	32.8	46.8

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Demographics and Other Voter Characteristics	Voted, % ^a	
	Contact Targets	Balance of Texas
Bell (Killeen, Temple)	23.5	44.1
Brazos (Bryan)	33.5	50.5
McLennan (Waco)	32.4	56.4
Hays (Austin)	37.3	54.1
Jefferson (Beaumont)	30.4	47.3
Average (25 counties listed)	34.8	47.8
Turnout statewide 2022	34.2	48.2

Source: Texas State Voter File and TGA Voter Contacts List.

^aTurnout for the entire state in 2022 was 46.1 percent.

^bUnless otherwise indicated.

other than unawareness of a coming election or the failure to be reminded to act.³⁷ A campaign’s canvassing operation cannot possibly overcome all these obstacles, even if every voter on the contact list is repeatedly reached at their doorstep.

Selection into Contact and 2022 Turnout

As noted, selection into the outreach universe and subsequent contacting might not elevate turnout to the same or better levels than those not on the contact list because the highly regular voters did not need a reminder. Table 2 corroborates this intuition, because noncontacts voted at a rate of 48.2 percent in 2022, whereas those on the contact list reached only 34.2 percent (turnout statewide was 46.1 percent). Expecting the turnout result from contact to be superior to the result without contact is, of course, unrealistic. On the other hand, a successful outreach effort should reduce the otherwise yawning turnout gap between the two groups.

Table 3 compares the 2022 turnout results for those on the contact list versus those who were excluded. The first data column shows an estimate of turnout for the selection into contact. The odds ratio reports the odds of voting among those on the contact list relative to those not the contact list as 0.56. In other words, those on the contact list voted at just 56 percent of the rate of the noncontacts in the general election. Going back to previous general elections, we find that the contacts also voted at lower rates than the noncontacts in those races.

The second column of Table 3 evaluates the impact of a variety of demographic variables related to selection. As we noted, the contact list focuses on lower-propensity groups, including Hispanics, younger people, nonprimary voters, and those with intermittent voting histories. Once these selection-related variables are explicitly included in a model of general election turnout, the odds ratio for the impact of being selected into contact increases to 0.78, literally meaning that those on the contact list not identified by the included control variables voted at a rate of 78 percent of those not on the contact list. This difference reflects the

³⁷ Charles E. Merriam and Harold F. Gosnell, *Non-Voting, Causes and Methods of Control* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924). Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). Elisabeth Gidengil, “The Decision to Vote or to Abstain.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Table 3. Turnout in 2022 Texas General Election by Campaign Contact Designation and Other Selected Characteristics^{a,b,c}

Demographics and Other Voter Characteristics	MLE(b) (SE)	OR	MLE(b) (SE)	OR	MLE(b) (SE)	OR
Intercept	-0.072 (0.0005)		1.696 (0.004)		1.793 (0.004)	
On contact list	-0.583 (0.0014)	0.558	-0.249 (0.002)	0.779	-0.259 (0.002)	0.772
Age (years)						
18-24			0.249 (0.001)	0.608	0.249 (0.001)	0.607
25-30			0.189 (0.001)	0.685	0.190 (0.001)	0.683
55-64			-0.134 (0.001)	1.308	-0.143 (0.001)	1.332
65-74			-0.146 (0.001)	1.339	-0.160 (0.001)	1.376
≥75			0.096 (0.001)	0.826	0.083 (0.001)	0.847
Hispanic			0.164 (0.001)	0.720	0.146 (0.001)	0.747
Voting history						
Early voter 2020			-0.926 (0.001)	6.371	-0.912 (0.001)	6.202
Republican primary 2022			-1.271 (0.002)	10.769	-1.291 (0.002)	13.232
Democratic primary 2022			-1.188 (0.002)	12.711	-1.202 (0.002)	11.063
Demographic						
% Democrat in zip code			-0.004 (.00003)	0.684	-0.010 (.00003)	0.684
Social Conservative			0.439 (0.003)	1.552	0.432 (0.003)	1.541
Veterans			0.083 (0.005)	1.086	0.097 (0.005)	1.102
Issue: guns			0.477 (0.007)	1.611	0.480 (0.007)	1.616
County fixed effects	No		No		Yes	
No.	17,437,208		17,437,208		17,437,208	
Nagelkerke R^2	0.008		0.289		0.295	
AIC	23,900,000		17,100,000		17,000,000	

Source: Texas state voter file and TGA [Texans for Greg Abbott] voter contacts list.

^aMultivariate logistic regression, dependent variable: 0 = did not vote; 1 = voted.

^bCell entries are coefficients (SEs); ORs reflect how the odds of voting change across range of values (increase/decrease) in the explanatory variable.

^cAll coefficients are significant at the $p \leq .01$ level.

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike Information Criterion; MLE(b), regression coefficient from maximum likelihood estimation; OR, odds ratio; SE, standard error.

gap in turnout not accounted for by age group, Hispanic ethnicity, vote history, neighborhood partisan balance, and ties to several Republican grassroots coalition groups.

The third column of [Table 3](#) presents results that include fixed effects for each of the state's 254 counties. The county level results are so numerous that they are not listed in the table, but their inclusion accounts for unmeasured factors associated with the residential grouping of voters by their counties of residence. A modest

Table 4. Turnout in 2022 Texas General Election Among Those Designated for Campaign Contact, by Selected Characteristics and Qualities of the Contact^{a,b}

Demographics and Other Voter Characteristics	MLE(b) (SE)	OR	MLE(b) (SE)	OR
Intercept	1.539 (0.011)*		1.624 (0.019)*	
Age, years				
18-24	0.139 (0.003)*	0.757	0.137 (0.003)*	0.760
25-30	0.207 (0.003)*	0.661	0.205 (0.003)*	0.663
55-64	-0.047 (0.002)*	1.099	-0.049 (0.002)*	1.103
65-74	-0.006 (0.003)	1.012	-0.010 (0.003)*	1.021
≥75	0.247 (0.003)*	0.611	0.242 (0.003)*	0.616
Race/ethnicity: Hispanic	0.168 (0.002)*	0.714	0.170 (0.002)*	0.711
Voting history				
Early voter 2020	-1.011 (0.002)*	7.553	-1.007 (0.002)*	7.493
Republican primary 2022	-1.361 (0.005)*	15.196	-1.236 (0.005)*	14.893
Democratic primary 2022	-1.244 (0.005)*	12.019	-1.350 (0.005)*	11.853
Political characteristic				
% Democrat in zip code	-0.003 (0.00001)*	0.745	-0.003 (0.00001)*	0.732
Social Conservative	0.317 (0.007)*	1.373	0.300 (0.007)*	1.350
Veterans	-0.002 (0.014)	0.998	-0.011 (0.013)	.988
Issue: guns	0.333 (0.018)*	1.396	0.327 (0.018)*	1.387
Source				
TGA	-0.129 (0.007)*	0.879	0.008 (0.009)	1.008
Camelback	-0.256 -0.005*	0.774	-0.365 -0.005*	0.694
Contact findings				
Total contacts in zip code			0.000002 (0.0000002)*	1.156
Took survey			0.315 (0.013)*	1.370
No answer			0.385 (0.012)*	1.470
Gated			0.308 (0.015)*	1.360
Not at home			0.069 (0.016)*	1.072
Refused			-0.046 (0.021)	0.955
Left voicemail			0.223 (0.027)*	1.249
Greg Abbott support			0.253 (0.005)*	1.288
Greg Abbott oppose			0.221 (0.008)*	1.247
Greg Abbott undecided			-0.054 (0.007)*	0.947
Month of contact			-0.049 (0.001)*	0.745
Door knocks			0.018 (0.002)*	1.200
Phone calls			0.004 (0.010)	1.014
No.	2,268,784		2,268,784	
Nagelkerke R ²	0.254		0.257	
AIC	2,517,892		2,509,906	

Source: Texas state voter file and TGA [Texans for Greg Abbott] voter contacts list.

^aMultivariate logistic regression, dependent variable: 0 = did not vote; 1 = voted.

^bCell entries are coefficients (SEs); ORs reflect how the odds of voting change across range of values (increase/decrease) in the explanatory variable.

* $p \leq .001$.

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike Information Criterion; MLE(b), regression coefficient from maximum likelihood estimation; OR, odds ratio; SE, standard error.

addition in explained variation results through the addition of these county-level controls, and small changes are evident in the estimates for the other variables, but nothing substantively weighty. We include these mainly as a robustness check.

Variation in Turnout by Qualities of Contact

Abbott's campaign collected and digested all contact-related data over the course of the election cycle. This was a high priority for several reasons, but mainly because it furthered the goals of performance evaluation and accountability. Camelback recorded detailed data on voter contact in their previous outreach operations, emphasized close supervision of 2022 field operations in Texas and performance improvement through data analysis. Consequently, the Abbott campaign's contact list is not simply coded for whether a canvasser knocked on a door or attempted a phone call; other detailed aspects of the attempt are also included. Among these are:

- whether the household could be accessed due to gate restrictions in some neighborhoods;
- whether the contact occurred by phone but reached an answering machine, in which case information was recorded about whether a voice message was left;
- whether the door knock was answered at all;
- whether the target, once at the door, took the short online (tablet or cellphone-based) survey the canvasser presented them; and
- the result from a standard identification question on whether voters supported or opposed the Governor's reelection (often called a "voter id" question).

Table 4 presents the effects of different contacting outcomes, controlling for the covariates described in the models listed in Table 3. Source information indicates whether those on the contact list were generated by data specialists within the Abbott campaign, by Camelback (the outreach vendor), or possibly by affiliated local and regional campaigns (the excluded baseline category). Note that the estimates for turnout from the Camelback effort are lower (0.77) than for the Abbott campaign (Texans for Greg Abbott [TGA]) (0.88): that is, the Camelback contacts voted in 2022 at a rate of 77 percent of the noncontacts, whereas the TGA contacts voted at a rate of 88 percent of the noncontacts. This difference is mainly an indication that the Camelback effort was charged with canvassing some very-low-turnout areas, including the three Rio Grande Valley counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr), each with large shares of low-propensity voters.

The indicator for the total number of contacts in a zip code area is a measure of how large and aggressive the local canvassing operation was in specific locales. On the low end, a zip code might contain dozens or a hundred or so contacts. On the high end, a zip code area might contain several thousand contacts and nearly every door. The mean number of contacts in a single zip code was approximately 10,700, but with a large standard deviation (9,300) for the more sparsely populated locations that were sometimes included. As we see in the second panel of Table 4, the range of the odds for this indicator is noticeably high (1.16), meaning that in the areas with the largest number of contacted voters, 2022 turnout was 1.16 times higher than in those with the smallest number of contacts. Considered alongside other included variables, this result is consistent with the idea that focused and

intense campaign efforts have an ecological impact on a neighborhood: they seem to create a kind of special event, by generating buzz and further localized communication. When 10,000 doors are canvassed in a single neighborhood, typically over a period of days, it is hard for residents not to notice.

We should not be surprised that door-knock attempts, independent of particular responses to those attempts, generated a substantial increase in turnout, and more contact is undoubtedly better. According to the estimates in [Table 4](#), a resident receiving up to 10 attempts voted at a rate 1.20 times that of residents receiving no knocks at all. Only a small number of voters received that kind of intense contact, most received only one, two, or three attempts, and the odds of turnout with even one attempt increased turnout about 2 percent over no effort at all. Still, when the contact list is large, including millions of voters, a 2 percent increase for attempting to make contact, is quite substantial. Note that this is not a two percent increase from an experimental effort carried out in a few neighborhoods; rather, this is two percent across a contact list of 2.5 million. The more limited outreach effort TGA launched to mobilize by phone also had a small positive impact over those not contacted, though the difference was not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Interestingly, the timing of contact does not behave in quite the way previous research would suggest. Typically, later contacts are thought to make more of a difference than earlier ones, driving turnout up more effectively. We suspect that this remains true, so why does our estimate show that voters contacted in October turned out at substantially lower rates than those in July or August? Based on our conversations with campaign operatives, many more low-propensity voters in difficult areas were the focus of the late campaign effort. Knowing that later contacts matter more, strategists within the campaign understandably reasoned that more difficult populations should be the focus of October contacting, rather than in July or August. The results for month of contact reported in [Table 4](#) reflect this strategic calculation to focus on harder cases and lower-propensity areas later in the campaign.

Those who were identified as Abbott supporters turned out at a rate 28 percent higher than those who did not offer an opinion about who they supported. By contrast, those who were identified as against Abbott turned out at a rate about 25 percent higher than those who offered no opinion. Those who explicitly mentioned they were undecided in the race were less likely to vote than those who simply refused to offer an opinion ([Table 4](#)).

As for the details recorded on the quality of the contact made, the most notable finding is that those willing to take the survey at the door turned out at very high rates relative to those who could not be reached, voting at a rate 1.37 times higher. This is a remarkably high impact, but it would be premature to suggest that the survey itself stimulated such enthusiasm. More likely, the voters willing to cooperate with the canvasser are more interested in politics generally, have opinions about the election, and may be the outgoing types of people who are willing to express their views.³⁸ They may be regular—or at least intermittent—voters. The door knock appears to have been fruitful in reminding them to vote, but they were not likely to be the hardest targets on the list.

³⁸ Michael J. Barber, Christopher B. Mann, J. Quin Monson, and Kelly D. Patterson, "Online Polls and Registration-Based Sampling: A New Method for Pre-election Polling," *Political Analysis* 22, no. 3 (2014): 321–35.

As noted, there are multiple codes for types of nonresponse to attempts at outreach. The results in Table 4 suggest that those coded as not answering (either door or phone), those in gated communities, and those contacted but only through a message on an answering machine, still turned out at respectable rates in November. Their turnout levels are not especially low despite not having the experience of face-to-face interaction with the campaign. Those who refused to cooperate upon being contacted voted at lower rates than others, though this result is only significant at a marginal level of statistical significance ($p \leq .03$). The lower voting participation level among uncooperative contacts could be rooted in a lack of interest in politics or the gubernatorial election, in the same way that those offering no opinion about the race voted at lower rates.

Readers should be reminded that these findings for frequency and quality of contact control for important covariates, ruling out some confounds. For example, the contact's age is included in the Table 4 results, suggesting that those who refuse to cooperate are not doing so simply because they are younger (i.e., presumably too busy), and that those who do cooperate are not doing so simply because they are elderly (i.e., perhaps lonely or homebound). The inclusion of the Hispanic ancestry variable suggests that the noncooperators are not people solely of that ethnic background. Finally, the vote history items in the model control for past involvement and activism in recent primary and general elections. The upshot is that those who refused to cooperate or who refused to offer an opinion when contacted are among the lowest-propensity targets on an already low-propensity list. Whatever burdens their participation, campaign contact is not likely to compensate.

Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the large body of research vouching for the effectiveness of door-to-door contacting in contemporary campaigns, managers and consultants face daunting practical concerns when implementing these programs. Perhaps most critically, how can a campaign overcome the costs of labor and capital associated with a major statewide outreach plan? Volunteers are not easy to recruit and are often not sufficiently reliable for large-scale field efforts. For this reason, campaigns locked in competitive statewide races have increasingly turned to vendors of grassroots outreach services for assistance. These firms ideally bring the advantages of accumulated previous experience with supervising and monitoring field workers, gathering and reporting data from canvassing operations, and evaluating performance.

Even with experience, however, the deployment of motivated, well-paid workers, charged with meeting specific goals, performance monitoring, and detailed data collection, carrying out large-scale field operations is very difficult. Turnover is high, working conditions in the summer heat can be miserable, and thorough recordkeeping is never easy. Little wonder, then, that many grassroots firms never deliver anything like what they promise. The experience of the 2022 Abbott campaign in Texas, though, suggests that a handful of determined operatives seem to have figured out what it takes to implement door-knocking at an impressive scale. The Camelback Group is surely not alone in this regard, but they appear to have leveraged a particular approach to recruiting, training, and feedback to become a viable provider of paid volunteer outreach. Much of their advantage seems to be due to their reliance on former missionary workers as canvassers; though we do not have canvasser background as a variable in our analysis, we can speculate about this

factor given the cost savings in recruitment and completion rates offered in their bid, plus the outreach promises, which were largely delivered during the campaign.

As for the electoral effectiveness of the paid canvassers, it is almost impossible to assess impact without a controlled experiment. This is especially the case given that we are talking about estimating improvements in turnout among medium- to low-propensity voters. On the one hand, the Abbott campaign correctly concluded that a large share of voters casts their ballots without ever being reminded. It is valuable to confirm that voters with steady voting habits do not need to be included on the lists for grassroots outreach. The focus, instead, should be on lower-propensity voters (i.e., those with spotty voting histories). But how low and how spotty? No one yet knows and this study offers only suggestive evidence, at best. Clearly there are many voters who will not vote despite repeated campaign contacts. Their nonparticipation is rooted in factors that clearly require some other intervention to remediate, perhaps none a political campaign can deploy. What this adds up to is that there are limits to what door-to-door campaign outreach can achieve even under the best of circumstances. When the targets for contact have minimal interest and past participation levels, any improvement from campaign contact will be modest. Still, a 2 or 3 percent improvement across 2.5 million contacts could mean the difference of 50,000 or 75,000 additional voters—a considerable increase that could potentially change an outcome.

From a more practical perspective, there is a risk that when low-propensity voters are targeted for turnout, across a mix of neighborhoods, some will show up and vote for the “wrong” candidate (i.e., the campaign will have mobilized voters for the opposition). This risk is even higher when the contact list is created for a field program in a state like Texas, which does not register voters by party affiliation. Moreover, the Abbott campaign also dared to concentrate attention on Hispanic voters in historically Democratic-stronghold counties, voters who, themselves, were undoubtedly Democrats. Because voters were identified for candidate support, we could determine that the pro-Abbott identifiers did vote at a higher rate than those who voiced opposition. But great care must be exercised when activating voters in politically mixed areas or in locations known to have hostile partisan majorities. A campaign is not out to mobilize voters for the sake of improving democracy. The goal is winning. If opposition voters are reminded to vote but without the occurrence of a conversion, then a campaign is simply shooting itself in the foot.

In the end, Abbott defeated O’Rourke by a 55 percent to 44 percent margin, with 8.1 million voters casting ballots (46 percent of registered voters). The average of polls conducted in October for the race showed Abbott with a 7.3-point lead. The margin appeared to increase over the last month of the campaign, although the Abbott campaign’s internal polling showed a consistent pro-Abbott edge. Despite a stiff challenge, then, Abbott bested Ted Cruz’s 2018 showing against O’Rourke by 8 points and arguably overperformed the polling.³⁹ Was a well-organized ground game partly responsible? Even with the access and data at hand, we cannot say with complete certainty. But our focus is as much on learning from the implementation of the plan as its electoral success. And what we can say is that political science research on contacting clearly ought to consider that paid canvassers are essential for large-scale outreach efforts, and that analyses

³⁹ According to state records, Abbott raised more than \$158 million for the 2021-2022 cycle, and O’Rourke raised more than \$80 million (accessed 25 November 2024; <https://www.followthemoney.org/show-me?s=TX&y=2022&c-r-ot=G&gro=c-t-id>).

of effects need to focus on medium- and low-propensity voters. If they do, our suspicion is that effect estimates are likely to be smaller but not inconsequential.

To be sure, there are significant limitations to our study. As noted earlier, it is largely descriptive, both with respect to the problems and attendant choices of the campaign, as well as the contacting program. Ours is an old-school observational approach in an era obsessed with causal inference. In addition, it is reasonable to ask whether Texas is a representative case from which to glean broader insights into contacting programs. After all, Texas remains a massive and populous Republican-leaning state, with a young, diverse electorate. But we view these characteristics as making Texas more interesting and attractive, given our intuition that the decision to do more door-to-door contacting is more complicated for a campaign than is commonly appreciated. Because of this, we view the opportunity to closely study the Abbott campaign's outreach program as serendipitous.

To return to our point of origin, despite the complications of needing to reach low-propensity voters in a highly polarized political environment, we continue to believe that campaigns have not exhausted their creative options on the turnout front. Future work should go inside real campaign efforts, like the one studied here, to evaluate what was done and whether it worked. Such efforts require that academic researchers venture off campus and form relationships with cooperative campaigns. The failure to form such partnerships has held back our understanding of how campaigns come to decisions about whom to contact, how they go about mobilizing them, and the results their efforts generate. Our hope is that this project serves as a template for future scholars as they set out to build on this undernourished body of knowledge.

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