Assessing the Impact of Campaigning in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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Abstract

Questions about the impact of U.S. presidential campaigning only grow more interesting after Donald Trump’s surprising victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016. This paper assesses the claim that the election was, in fact, surprising, as well as the effect of traditional modes of campaigning—television advertising and candidate appearances—in this race. The data show that although Trump’s pathway to victory was unusual, the election was not as much of an outlier as some might think.

Introduction

In the wake of Republican Donald Trump’s victory over Democrat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, perhaps the most common response was surprise. More specifically, journalists, pundits, and practitioners were shocked that Trump had managed to win the Electoral College despite trailing in most polls, despite being significantly out-spent, and despite several seemingly devastating scandals and gaffes. A CNN.com article, entitled “Five Surprising Lessons from Trump’s Astonishing Win,” captured the essence of this reaction:

“The polls were wrong. Projection models were wrong. Veterans of previous presidential campaigns were wrong. Trump’s victory is one of the most stunning upsets in American political history. American voters swept Republicans into power, handing the GOP the White House, the Senate and the House in a wave that no one saw coming. Political professionals will now spend the coming weeks and months studying just how and why everyone missed it.”

A key component of this shock is that Trump’s campaign seemed to violate some (most?) of the basic rules with respect to how an effective presidential campaign is run. They did not raise very much money (in relative terms), and they did not spend on those aspects of the campaign that most practitioners—and more than a few academics—think are vital to success: extensive television advertising and face-to-face contacting.

But shock and surprise are emotional reactions, and can be rooted in an array of biased readings of data and events. Now that the cold facts of the election are available, it is useful to systematically examine our assumptions about the 2016 contest. To begin with, I am interested in documenting the extent to which Trump’s election is, in fact, different from recent presidential contests in the United States. Based on Trump’s apparently unique coalition and his strong performance in states that have not gone Republican in many elections, I assume that 2016 was a different kind of election. But it is unclear how much it differed from the Bush or Obama races. Next, I am interested in the extent to which traditional modes of campaigning were (or were not) effective in 2016. Like many in political science, I am skeptical about the efficacy of many sorts of campaign outreach, but acknowledge the need to put this skepticism to the empirical test. To assess the nature of Trump’s election and the role of the campaign, I focus on unique state-level data from the 2016 contest.

Context and Theory

The Path to the White House, circa 2016

On November 8, 2016, Republican presidential nominee Donald J. Trump won states worth 306 electoral votes, defeating Democratic nominee Hillary R. Clinton, who won states worth 232 electoral votes. The election capped an extraordinary year featuring an open-contest to succeed the two-term Democratic incumbent president, Barack Obama. The Republican nomination process drew 17 candidates, including several high-profile U.S. Senators (Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, Lindsay Graham, Rick Santorum), several governors (Jeb Bush, John Kasich, Scott Walker, Chris Christie, Bobby Jindal, Rick Perry, George Pataki, Mike Huckabee, Jim Gilmore), prominent business executives (including Trump and Carly Fiorina), and even a well-known brain surgeon (Ben Carson). After the March 15 primaries, only Trump, Cruz, and Kasich were left standing. Indeed, after months of talk about a contentious nomination fight and a “brokered” or “multi-ballot” convention, Trump gained the majority of delegates he needed to win the Republican nomination on May 19 with his win in North Dakota, and was formally nominated at the party’s national convention on July 19 in Cleveland, Ohio.

By contrast, Hillary Clinton—the heir-apparent given her national standing and runner-up finish to Obama in the 2008 nominating contest—led a sparse Democratic field of contenders. After easily dispatching Martin O’Malley and James Webb, she was left alone with Vermont Democratic-Socialist Bernie Sanders. Sanders, however, proved a


2 These totals also include split votes from Maine, which allocates electoral votes through district-wide elections as well as the statewide vote. The actual electoral vote was recorded as 304 for Trump to 227 for Clinton, with seven electors registering “protest” votes for other candidates.
formidable and stubborn foe. Sanders drew support from a coalition of younger, whiter, and more educated Democratic voters, and scored a number of impressive victories over Clinton, including upset wins in Michigan and Wisconsin. Clinton did not win the nomination until the June 7 California primary, and even then her margin was padded by disproportionate support from Democratic Party office-holders and officials who serve as “unpledged delegates” to the national convention. She became the Democratic standard-bearer and the first major party female presidential nominee on July 24 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

With the major party conventions both concluded by August 1, the general election and its campaign began in earnest. Except that both campaigns spent the late summer raising money and laying the groundwork for the fall campaign. The Trump campaign used July and August to build a digital infrastructure that was the focal point of its fundraising effort. While active on the airwaves (the campaign aired TV ads on host network NBC during the Summer Olympics) and in the field, the Clinton campaign also spent the late summer replenishing its coffers, which had been somewhat depleted in wrestling control of the nomination from Sanders. By Labor Day (September 5), however, both campaigns had purchased much of their TV advertising for the fall campaign and were visiting multiple battleground states on an almost daily basis.

Despite some outward similarities with previous campaigns, the 2016 election featured a distinct context and two unique candidates. The distinctiveness of the context resided in the fact that the out-going president was personally popular (with favorability ratings near 60%), but advanced policies that were not especially liked. Specifically, Obama’s signature legislative achievement—the Affordable Care Act of 2010—never had more than 50 percent support in public opinion polls, while his stimulus package—the Investment and Recovery Act of 2009—was widely panned by both Republicans and liberal Democrats. Similarly, his executive action granting legal status to nearly 11 million undocumented workers was unpopular with a large segment of the American population, as were his agreements with Iran and (to a lesser degree) Cuba.

The economy, meanwhile, also produced a puzzling countercontextual situation. While job growth had been consistent and sizable since the end of the economic downturn of 2008-09, economic growth was anemic and income inequality increased substantially. In short, it wasn’t clear heading into the election whether things were getting better, getting worse, or whether we were simply treading water. To be clear, polls indicated that Americans wanted a “change”; but it was much less clear that this desire was linked to a rejection of the incumbent president or a desire to change economic policy.

What was clear by Labor Day was that the major party candidates were not viewed favorably by the American public. Trump’s favorability rating hovered around 30 percent, while Clinton’s tended to be about 5 points higher (occasionally touching 40 percent). Americans viewed Trump as a strong leader, but without the requisite temperament, knowledge, and honesty to be president. Conversely, Clinton’s problem was more localized and perhaps more acute: she was viewed as insufficiently honest and trustworthy.

To make their respective cases to voters, the campaigns pursued divergent paths. Trump’s campaign lacked the infrastructure and available cash (Trump loaned approximately $60 million to his campaign during 2016, but refrained from a larger commitment) of Clinton’s, and they emphasized (1) earned media, (2) personal appearances, and (3) digital targeting and outreach. To be sure, Trump’s campaign was hardly invisible on the network and cable airwaves. But they did not approach Clinton’s presence, nor that for Obama or Romney in 2012. Clinton, on the other side of the ledger, emphasized a combination of what was effective in her husband’s presidential campaigns (massive television ad buys) and what was effective in Obama’s campaigns (extensive, targeted, on-the-ground outreach). Both candidates prepared extensively for the three debates, but Clinton took considerable time off the trail to do so while Trump continued to make appearances as he prepared.

By the eve of the election, the consensus was that Clinton was close to a sure-bet. The national and state-by-state polls mostly told a consistent story: Clinton was up by a few points nationally and held a slight edge in most of the battleground states. Of the eleven national polls published as part of the “Real Clear Politics” average on November 8, the day of the election, ten had Clinton ahead. The average was Clinton +3.3 points. The statewide polling averages showed Clinton with a lead in enough states to win 272 electoral votes, while Trump had 266 electoral votes. Other “polling aggregators” showed a larger Clinton lead in the Electoral College. More complex analyses read these data and concluded that the Democrats were very likely to win the White House. As shown in Table 1, the popular election forecasting site fivethirtyeight.com pegged Clinton’s chances for victory at a 0.71 probability, while The New York Times’ “The Upshot” had it at 0.87, and Huffington Post and the Princeton Election Consortium had it over 0.99.

### Table 1. Media and Market Models of the 2016 Presidential Election and the Actual Result

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nate Silver (fivethirtyeight.com)</td>
<td>Polls plus historical tendencies and current conditions</td>
<td>0.71 for Clinton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Upshot</td>
<td>State and national polls</td>
<td>0.85 for Clinton</td>
</tr>
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</table>

3 In the end, according to Brad Pascale (Trump’s Digital Director), Trump ended up spending as much on digital outreach as on TV ads (about $500 million). Clinton campaign officials spent at least this amount, but the ratio of digital to television was much more lopsided in favor of TV (based on comments from “Roundtable Discussion: The General Election,” at Harvard University’s “Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2016”).

4 All polls were four-way ballots with Johnson and Stein included. The sole “pro-Trump” outlier was Investors’ Business Daily/TIPP Daily Tracking, which had Trump ahead by two points.
Why 2016 Might Have Been Unique

In some ways, the 2016 contest does not look all that distinct from recent presidential elections. As mentioned earlier, it was an open contest with a somewhat popular (if polarizing) incumbent finishing his term and not up for re-election. Although the sitting vice-president was not running, there was a clear “heir to the throne” in the race. The economy was viewed as improved but fragile. Since 1950, the only presidential elections that might be considered relevant comparisons are 1960 (Kennedy challenges Nixon, with concerns about recession in the air), 1968 (Nixon challenges Humphrey, with the economy strong but dragged down by the Vietnam War), 1988 (Dukakis challenges G.H.W. Bush, with the economy showing some signs of slowing), and 2000 (G.W. Bush challenges Gore, with the economy just beginning to slip into recession). Consistent with this interpretation, both political science forecasts and the polls offered a similar expectation: a close election with perhaps a slight edge to the “change” candidate.

In other ways, however, 2016 does not look at all like your typical presidential election. Most notably, electioneering scholars would readily point to the candidates and their campaigns. The candidates were historically disliked. Much more so than the 1980 Reagan-Carter election, the only race for which we have polls showing the candidates with relatively high “unfavorable” ratings. And the campaigns apparently pursued very different paths, both with respect to their preferred modes of outreach as well as with respect to their minimum winning coalitions. To be sure, this claim has little solid empirical backing at this point, but it certainly comports with an anecdotal review of the journalistic accounts of the election.

Thus, 2016 offers us an interesting case. Contrary to studies of local (Gerber and Green 2004), gubernatorial (Carsey 2000, Leaf 2006), and congressional elections (Jacobson 1978), many studies of presidential elections show that campaigns are epiphenomenal. Most academics believe that campaigns have only minor effects on the outcome of presidential elections, particularly compared to circumstantial factors such as the economy or whether or not the country is at war (see, for example, Campbell 2001, Holbrook 1996, Sides and Vavreck 2013). But this perspective is premised on the fact that presidential campaigns tend to “cancel each other out” by campaigning in the same way, at the same level, in the same places (Gelman and King 1993). This is the critical theoretical point for the larger debate on campaign effects: voters can be moved—either to vote or to vote a certain way—but this movement is entirely pre-dictable given their predispositions (partisan attachments) and objective circumstances (the state of the economy, and the existence of war or peace) unless there are asymmetries in either the volume or the quality of the campaigns. It is these campaign asymmetries that produce campaign effects; otherwise elections “merely” get people to where they “should” be by Election Day. Put another way, they do not have independent effects on either voters or election outcomes. This is why 2016 is so intriguing: If there were major discrepancies in what Trump and Clinton did, and where they did it, the campaign might have been a larger part of the explanation for 2016 than it typically is for presidential elections.

Analyzing the 2016 Presidential Election

My focus in this article is on the question of predictability. To what degree was Trump’s vote different than what we might have expected given recent presidential elections and given the particular (non-campaign) conditions of 2016? To the extent that his vote was different than expected, how much did the campaign matter? In Table 2, we see that of seven well-known political science models, four predicted a popular vote victory for Hillary Clinton and three predicted a popular vote victory for Donald Trump. Furthermore, a couple of the models accurately predicted the final popular vote. But it is consequential that none predicted a popular vote victory for Clinton and an Electoral College victory for Trump; we wish to know how predictable or unique the 2016 presidential election results were in the fifty states.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Prediction</th>
<th>Difference (Clinton 51%)</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abramowitz</td>
<td>Presidential approval, GDP growth, incumbency</td>
<td>Trump 51.4%</td>
<td>Trump overstated by +2.5</td>
<td>0.66 for Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis-Beck &amp; Tien</td>
<td>President’s popularity, economic growth, job creation, incumbency</td>
<td>Clinton 51%</td>
<td>Exactly correct</td>
<td>0.83 for Clinton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Per capita GDP, incumbency, party’s time in office, inflation</td>
<td>Trump 56.0%</td>
<td>Trump overstated by +7.1</td>
<td>No probability offered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lockerbie</td>
<td>Polling asking people if they expect to be better off financially in a year or not, as well as the party’s length of time in the White House</td>
<td>Clinton 50.4%</td>
<td>Trump overstated by +0.7</td>
<td>0.62 for Clinton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analytically, then, the unit of analysis I am interested is the state. Statewide results determine electors to the Electoral College, and are therefore the most fundamental unit of analysis. But how can I best gauge the uniqueness of 2016? My method is simple: I calculate the average Republican share of the two-party presidential vote for the four elections from 2000 to 2012; I then calculate the average; and I then subtract this from Trump’s share of the two-party presidential vote in 2016. This produces an estimate of how the 2016 vote differed from the “average” recent vote in the state. I use averages because a given election—for example, 2012—might produce outlying results for specific states. Furthermore, these four elections—one solid Democratic win (2008), one close Republican win (2004), one close Democratic win (2012), and one “tie” (2000)—nicely represent the range of possible results given the contemporary party system.5

With this estimate of deviation from average as the main descriptive/dependent variable, I can turn to developing a model of this deviation (“uniqueness”). I am, of course, interested in assessing the degree to which the campaign explains uniqueness, so I need measures of distinct forms of campaigning at the state-level. Three forms of campaigning are most prominent in the literature: (1) television advertising, (2) candidate appearances, and (3) the ground game. For television advertising, I rely on estimates of dollars spent by the campaigns and party committees over the course of the general election campaign in each state.6 These rely on Bloomberg News’s analysis of Kantar Media/CMAG data.7 Only TV advertising is examined here: broadcast, cable, and satellite. Moreover, only spending by the two major party campaigns was included. Since media markets often overlap more than one state, it is important to observe that each media market where the campaigns are advertising was assigned to the battleground state it’s being used to target.

For candidate appearances, I rely on data from “Travel Tracker,” a data analytic tool on the website of The National Journal. These estimates were verified by inspections of the daily offerings of The New York Times and the campaigns’ websites. “Appearances” are defined as public appearances (fundraising events are excluded from the count), so that a candidate could be credited with multiple visits in a single state on a particular day. Data are presented for both presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

For the ground game, I rely on the number of field offices in each state.8 Data reflect offices open as of Oct. 4, 2016. Offices are included only if they had verifiable addresses: I do not rely on the aggregate numbers claimed by either campaign. As such, these totals may undercount offices. Republican National Committee offices, “Victory” or “Victory 365” offices run through the coordinated campaign, or locatable county offices in battleground states were considered Trump offices. Trump’s website listed office locations in only six states. Information on other states was gathered from those state party websites, county party Facebook pages, and the website p2016.org. Office openings mentioned in news reports were included when addresses could be located, and state party headquarters were excluded unless specifically listed as a Trump office. To locate Clinton’s offices, we used the “Find your closest field office” feature on her campaign website.

In addition to these campaign variables, I include measures capturing several other factors that might have produced a unique result in 2016. Perhaps most importantly, I employ a measure of the percent of “white” voters in a state. The underlying idea is that Trump may have done better than the average Republican candidate by crafting an appeal that was particularly resonant with white (and even more particularly, lower status white) voters. Given the importance of the economy in voters’ political evaluations, I also rely on a measure of per capita change in gross domestic product (GDP) from 2010 to 2013 (the most recent period for which statewide data are available) for each state.9 My expectation is that states with poorer economies are more likely to move away from the incumbent party. Finally, I rely on a measure of percentage point change in the state population. Presumably, states with dynamic populations are more likely to exhibit dynamic voting patterns.

Results

Figure 1A displays the difference between the average Republican presidential share of the two-party vote and

5 Including the Clinton elections of 1992 and/or 1996 not only stretches the time-frame backwards quite a bit, but also introduces the complexity of a southern Democrat running in elections with a strong third party candidate.

6 For all analyses, the general election is defined as Labor Day (September 5, 2016) through Election Day (November 8, 2016). The use of dollars spent instead of total airings is debatable. I have run the data using each of these measures and find no substantive differences.

7 Estimates from Oct. 21-Nov. 7 are from Ad Age’s analysis of Kantar Media/CMAG data.

8 I do not include measures of digital outreach as part of my ground game measure. This is mostly a practical decision, as I do not have relevant data on digital spending at the state-level for 2016 (or any other election, for that matter). Because of this, I may underestimate the effects of GOTV efforts, especially for Trump, who invested heavily in digital mobilization efforts.

9 The Census Bureau has preliminary data on per capita income for 2016; running these data as the main economic variable does not change the main findings.
Trump's vote for each of the fifty states plus the District of Columbia. Bars below the center line indicate that Trump “under-achieved,” while bars above the line indicate that Trump “over-achieved.” As one can see, Trump over-achieved in a majority of states (32, to be exact), occasionally doing so spectacularly. In West Virginia, for example, his share of the two-party vote was +0.15 over the average, which means his margin over Clinton was almost 30 points greater than “expected” in a typical race! Conversely, Trump under-achieves most dramatically in three states: Utah (where multiple independent candidacies undoubtedly hurt him), California, and Texas. Much has been written about Clinton “running up the score” in California, which helped her win the national vote but did little to further her prospects of winning the Electoral College. Relatively little has been said, however, about how Trump’s poor showing in Texas undercut his popular vote total.

The GOP-standard bearer was not well-received in all swing states. There were four battleground states where he under-achieved, Virginia, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. The last three of these are in the Rocky Mountain west, where growing millennial and Latino populations were undoubtedly a factor. Fortunately for Trump, while his losses in Virginia and Colorado took traditional battleground states out of play, he was able to hold onto Arizona. There is, in short, considerable evidence that Trump changed the electoral map: he ceded some ground, especially in the Rocky Mountain west, in exchange for gaining ground in the upper Midwest and Mid-Atlantic states. The exchange was extremely beneficial to the Republican Party, however, as it cost Trump only Colorado and Virginia (no sure bet for any Republican candidate these days), while securing him Ohio and Iowa and gaining him Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. In this sense, 2016 was quite different from the preceding four (or even six) presidential elections. But how can we best explain these changes?

A number of journalists and practitioners credited Trump’s performance in states such as Wisconsin and Michigan to his campaign choices. More to the point, they believed that Trump spent time and money in these states whereas Clinton took them for granted. In this way, the results reflected unbalanced or asymmetrical campaigning. In Figures 2A-C, I show the relative campaign made by Trump and Clinton across three forms of outreach: television advertising, candidate appearances, and field offices.

Notes: Calculations are based on the Republican share of the two-party vote. Thus, for 2016 Trump’s share of the two-party vote is divided by Trump’s + Clinton’s share of the two-party vote. The same is done for 2000 through 2012, with the average result serving as the comparison point. Negative numbers therefore represent Trump “under-achieving” compared to Bush, McCain, and Romney, while positive numbers represent Trump “over-achieving.”
general dominance, Trump did spent more heavily in three states: Colorado, Virginia, and Wisconsin. He also had a slight advantage in Michigan, where his small TV ad buy totals eclipsed Clinton’s. Still, the distribution of TV ad spending across the states suggests that Clinton ought to have done better than predicted and that other factors were probably more central to explaining Trump’s success.

Another aspect of the campaign is personal appearances. There is an old saying amongst consultants that says the two most valuable resources in any campaign are the candidate’s time and the candidate’s money. If TV advertising is the best functional expression of a campaign’s money, then candidate appearances are the best functional expression of the candidate’s time. Figure 2B shows where the presidential and vice-presidential candidates allocated their visits between September 5 and Election Day. Whereas Clinton and the Democrats dominated with respect to TV ads, Trump and the Republicans dominated with respect to candidate appearances. Trump racked up 109 public appearances over this nine week period, compared to 65 for Clinton. Pence also managed slightly more visits than Kaine, 70 to 64. Perhaps more tellingly, Trump was much more active than Clinton in Florida, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. But Clinton did make multiple appearances in each of those states, except for Wisconsin. Furthermore, Trump also made many more appearances than Clinton in New Hampshire, Colorado, and Virginia but lost all three of those states, receiving below average vote percentages in the latter two.

Interestingly, the popular notion that the Democrats ignored the “blue wall” states of the upper Midwest is not entirely corroborated by these data. When it comes to hitting the campaign trail, Clinton was extremely active in Pennsylvania and somewhat active in Michigan. The more accurate interpretation is that the vice-presidential nominee and surrogates were the primary weapon of choice for states that were seen as needing only a little bit of maintenance. Kaine made appearances in Minnesota and Wisconsin, while the Obamas were dispatched to Michigan a couple of days before the election.

Beyond TV ads and candidate appearances, presidential campaigns are also about the ground game. There are, of course, many ways to conceptualize the ground game but the most obvious is to simply tally the field offices maintained by the respective campaigns. Figure 2C displays the field offices established in each state by the Trump and Clinton campaigns. Here, as with TV ad spending, we see a significant edge for Clinton. Overall, as of October 4, 2016, Clinton had 489 field offices compared to 207 for Trump. In Ohio, he had 75 to his 22; in Pennsylvania, she had 57 to his 42; in Florida, she had 68 to his 29. Even in Wisconsin and Michigan, she had field office advantages of +7 and +21, respectively.
Officials from the Trump campaign have argued that field offices do not accurately reflect their activity on the ground. They emphasize that the “bricks and mortar” offices are expensive and unnecessary in an age of digital communication and outreach. Brad Parscale, Digital Communications Director for Trump, stated Trump spent over $100 million on his digital campaign, achieving a 1:1 ratio with TV ad spending. He also stated that the campaign spent $5 million on digital efforts to “get-out-the-vote” in Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin over the final few days. News media estimates based on Federal Election Commission reports back the notion that Trump invested more than Clinton on digital outreach, pegging Trump’s digital spending during the final nine weeks of the general election campaign at $29 million, compared to $16 million for Clinton.

But a closer look at Trump’s digital spending indicates that some appreciable portion of his overall spending on digital campaigning was dedicated to fundraising rather than GOTV. Moreover, even conceding that Trump engaged in more digitally-based outreach—a major and contentious concession—it seems unlikely that his ground game was markedly better than Clinton in many states. Indeed, while we are now skeptical of the conventional wisdom that Clinton had a massive edge with respect to the ground game given the election itself and the arguments of insiders like Parscale, it is difficult to reject the prevailing assumption of Clinton’s superiority (given the data at hand).

The distributions of different types of campaigning are instructive, of course, but only to a point. Election scholars correctly observe that campaigns tend to concentrate their efforts on voters and in locations where they think they can be effective, creating a “chicken-and-egg” dilemma: did voters move in response to the campaign or would they have moved on their own anyway, as they became more engaged with the race and connected the choice at hand with what is going on in the country and in their own lives? Then there is also the difficulty of teasing out the effects of different types of campaigning that are aimed at the same voters and states. Was it TV advertising or the candidates’ appearances that was most directly connected with shifts in preferences? Table 3 offers a model of the uniqueness of Trump’s vote across the states while controlling for different campaign efforts as well as a set of objective circumstances and conditions.

The simple model I am testing uses a least squares estimator to ascertain the independent effects of TV advertising (measured in millions of dollars), presidential and vice-presidential candidate appearances, and field offices. The control variables include (1) percent white in the state, (2) 2010-13 percent population change within the state, and (3) 2010-13 change in per capita GDP. Again, the dependent variable is the difference between Trump’s 2016 share of the two-party vote and the average share of the two-party vote won by Republican candidates in elections from 2000-12. This number varies between +1.0 and -1.0, with positive numbers (and coefficients) indicating a “better” performance for Trump compared to “expected.” Overall, the model performs reasonably well, registering well above conventional levels of statistical significance (the F-Statistic is significant at the 0.001 level) and correctly predicting about 13 percent of the total variance in Trump’s performance across the 51 relevant jurisdictions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Modeling the 2016 Presidential Vote</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predicting Trump performance compared to 2000-16 Rep. presidential average (share of the two-party vote)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV dollars spent by Clinton-Kaine (in millions)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TV dollars spent by Trump-Pence (in millions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton appearances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump appearances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaine appearances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pence appearances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump-Pence/RNC field offices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton-Kaine/DNC office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% white in state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita GDP change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-Square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error of Estimate</td>
</tr>
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The campaign variables produce mixed results. The regression coefficients associated with television ad spending, for example, are correctly signed (additional Trump spending increases his performance compared to average, while additional Clinton spending decreases it). But the substantive effects are somewhat pedestrian; holding all other factors constant, a $1 million increase in Trump’s TV ad spending improves his showing compared to average by about 1 point. Moreover, one cannot really rule out the possibility that this effect is a function of statistical noise. The same is true—in the opposite direction—for Clinton’s TV spending, although we are slightly more confident that the influence of Clinton’s TV is not due to statistical noise.

The story is different (and fascinating) for candidate appearances. Notice that the sign for the candidate travel coefficients are all in the opposite direction from what one would expect. In other words, Trump’s and Pence’s appearances were associated with a decrease in Republican performance compared to average, whereas Clinton’s and Kaine’s performance compared to average increased compared to average.
appearances were associated with an increase. For Clinton’s appearances, the effect was substantial: each additional Clinton appearance boosted Trump’s performance versus average by 3 points. There is only a four in one hundred chance that the estimated effect is due to statistical noise. The remaining candidates produced a smaller effect—about a one-point shift in the wrong direction.

Despite the fact that these travel effects are statistically marginal, it is tempting to take them at face value. The presidential candidates were the least well-liked in recent American history, and it is not implausible that they would produce a backlash when they stumped in a given state. Backing this interpretation is that neither candidate received favorable new media coverage during the campaign, such that local scrutiny might have actually highlighted the fact that the candidates were (at least in the minds of voters) flawed.

Our final measure of the campaign—field offices—had almost no explanatory power with respect to Trump’s performance compared to average. Indeed, the relevant coefficients for Trump’s and Clinton’s field offices are essentially zero; as in, opening an additional field office in a state does nothing to increase (for Trump) or decrease (for Clinton) Trump’s vote. Given the plethora of recent research demonstrating the positive effects of face-to-face outreach in a wide range of campaigns, I am even more open than I usually would be to the argument that field offices are too blunt a measure to get at the impact of this form of outreach. Perhaps volunteers or contacts, which may become available in the aftermath of 2016, will provide a more instructive measure. Or perhaps it is the case that the fundamentals are driving voters in a presidential race in a way that they do not in down-ballot races.

Meanwhile, Table 3 suggests that the fundamentals were, in fact, an important part of the story for 2016. Most notably, the percent of white voters in a state is a statistically significant predictor of Trump’s relative performance. To cast the effect in more interpretable terms, for every ten percent increase in the white population Trump gets an additional percentage point compared to the average Republican presidential candidate. Put another way, all other things held constant Trump would do 3 points better than Bush/McCain/Romney in a state like Iowa (93% white) compared to a state like Georgia (63% white). The model also shows that states with more dynamic populations were less generous to Trump than towards the average GOP candidate, although the effect isn’t very large and is only marginally significant statistically.

What about the economy? I use change in per capita state GDP to measure the effect of the economy on Trump’s showing, and the data are positive if not overwhelming. A 5-point increase in per capita GDP increases Trump’s voter compared to average by about 3 points. This is inconsistent with my expectation that states that are experiencing more difficult economic times would be more likely to throw their support to Trump. But a closer examination of the data reveals the cause of this anomaly: South Dakota. The Mount Rushmore State experienced an increase in per capita GDP of 11.9 percent between 2010 and 13 due to the energy boom and was also quite friendly towards Trump, who had pledged to un-do President Obama’s restrictions and regulations on fracking and other natural gas exploration techniques. If I omit South Dakota from the analysis, the sign on the economic variable reverses (conforming to my original expectations) but is insignificant statistically.

Conclusion
An exploration of state-level data from the 2016 presidential election provides solid empirical support for the argument that Donald Trump’s vote represents an important departure from the previous four elections. While the 2000-12 elections produced only ten states with a split voting record, in 2016 we saw three states (Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) representing 46 electoral votes flip for the first time since 1988. We also saw Trump nearly carry reliably-Democratic Minnesota and Maine, while the Democrats had nearly misses in Arizona and Georgia. The coalitional basis for this shift has become a staple of journalistic explanations for 2016—white, lower socio-economic status voters defected from the Democrats, while younger, more racially diverse voters continued (albeit at sluggish rates) to favor the Democrats over the Republicans. Prior to November 8, 2016, almost all of the conversation about party system dynamics focused on the rise of Democratic fortunes due to the mobilization of ascendant elements of the country; after the 2016 election, it has become clear that this ascendance may be problematic if the Democrats lose their traditional white, working class edge.

If 2016 thus represents a path-breaking election for students of voting and party systems, it is no less challenging for students of campaigns. The data on traditional modes of campaigning suggest that Hillary Clinton had the edge. She certainly did more on television and with field offices. Trump and Pence were more active on the campaign trail than Clinton and Kaine, but the data indicate that this might not have necessarily been a good thing, given how unpopular the candidates were and how negative the news media were in covering them. At any rate, there is scant evidence that Trump’s over-performance was the result of an especially effective campaign.

This result is disappointing in some regards. As mentioned earlier, studies of presidential campaigns are usually limited because both sides target the same states with maximal resources, such that neither side is likely to gain an advantage. But in 2016, there were several states where one side or the other had a substantial edge on at least one form of campaigning. Partly, this reflected an asymmetry in resources, with Clinton having much more money and labor than Trump. Partly, it reflected a difference in views of the battlefield. Trump saw the “blue wall” states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania as true battleground states, 13 Nevada, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, Florida, Virginia, New Hampshire, and North Carolina, and as well as New Mexico and Indiana (which were widely regarded as single election flukes).
whereas (with the exception of Pennsylvania) Clinton saw them as leaning strongly to her side. Conversely, Trump saw reliably Republican states such as Arizona, Georgia, Utah, and Texas as strongly leaning to him, while Clinton saw Arizona (at least) as a true battleground. At any rate, I had presumed that these strategic differences and the resource asymmetries would combine to produce the potential for substantive campaign effects. Those did not materialize, not in these data at least.

Two take-away points are worth offering. First, I am prone to believe that TV advertising simply does not move voters much in presidential elections anymore. Early advertising, in a race where the candidates are not as well-known, might well produce effects. But by the fall of an election between two well-known candidates? Not so much. In the future, it seems likely that candidates will lay down a modest layer of television advertising, just to shore up their images and prevent negative media coverage, and then spend their money on personalized and digitally-based outreach.

Second, I suspect that the measures of campaigning I am employing here are too blunt to show the fine-grained effects more likely to be associated with modern presidential campaigning. If I could isolate campaigning by the media market or zip code, my guess is that there are pockets of the country where campaigning mattered. Or if my measures of campaigning—especially digital contacting and face-to-face outreach—were more specific, I suspect the results might also be different. These sorts of data will likely be available in the future and certainly merit exploration.

I should also point out that campaigning here is defined as the strategic choices and dispensation of resources associated with the 2016 presidential contest. While debates, scandals, and gaffes absolutely fall under any reasonable definition of the campaign, I do not consider them here and any conclusions about the campaign exclude these events.

But the bottom-line is still unavoidable: 2016 was a different election than we might have expected given its predecessors, and this was almost certainly due to the combination of shifts in the mood of the electorate along with the presence of two candidates with formidable skills and an array of baggage. Throw in the always difficult to measure variable of news media coverage, and you have the recipe for 2016. The campaigns, which might have been a critical variable in such a circumstance, were ultimately overwhelmed by candidate, voter, and media dynamics.

References


