

# Assessing the Electoral Payoffs of Partisan Mobilization in Adverse Contexts: A Field Experimental Study of the 2011 Spanish Local Elections\*

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## 1. Introduction

Political parties spend considerable time and effort mobilizing voters during electoral campaigns. The effectiveness of electoral campaigns has long been a focus of research in political science, and one of the key areas of research of Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck (e.g., Farrell/Schmitt-Beck 2002; Schmitt-Beck 2007). After a period of increased professionalization of electoral campaigning and heavy reliance on mass media to reach voters, Obama's 2008 presidential campaign demonstrated that modern electoral campaigning can successfully combine highly personalized and targeted strategies based on grassroots mobilization and 'modern' impersonal and capital-intensive methods. In its footsteps, the French Socialist Party launched an unprecedented door-to-door canvassing campaign for François Hollande's 2012 presidential bid. The renewed enthusiasm since the late 2000s for grassroots electoral campaigning was partly drawing on a considerable body of scholarship that, using randomized field experiments, showed that face-to-face "get out the vote" (GOTV) strategies (especially, *door-to-door canvassing*)<sup>1</sup> affect voter turnout and party choices (cf. Bochel/Denver 1970; Bennion 2005; Cardy 2005; Green/Gerber 2008; John/Brannan 2008; Panagopoulos 2009b; Green et al. 2013).

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1 While door-to-door (D2D) canvassing is the most commonly studied, other forms of face-to-face (F2F) campaigning, such as distributing leaflets on the street or in markets are equally employed to mobilize voters.

The vast majority of the existing scholarship has traditionally focused on the United States and the United Kingdom (e.g., Gerber/Green 1999, 2000; Nickerson 2005; McNulty 2005; Gerber/Green 2005; Levine/Lopez 2005; Nickerson et al. 2006; John/Brannan 2006, 2008; Fieldhouse et al. 2013; Foos/John 2018; Townsley 2018; Foos et al. 2021). These are the established democracies where targeted personalized party canvassing constituted a 'traditional' form of mobilizing the electorate in what is regarded by some as the 'golden age' of personalized and local grassroots campaigning (Beck/Heidemann 2010). As early as the 1950s, the academic consensus was that this style of electoral canvassing common in the US, Britain, and other English-speaking democracies was far less frequent in most other established democracies (Eldersveld 1956). Research suggests that this has continued to be the case, as door-to-door (D2D) canvassing is less common in countries like Sweden or the Netherlands than in places such as the US, Britain, Canada or New Zealand (Karp et al. 2008). Despite the less frequent use by political parties of D2D canvassing in continental Europe, it is by no means a completely alien form of electoral mobilization and, hence, in recent years, field experimental research on the electoral returns of personalized D2D partisan campaigning in continental European countries has gradually developed to assess its impact in a larger range of countries, including France (Pons 2018), Italy (Kendall et al. 2015; Cantoni/Pons 2021), Denmark (Bhatti et al. 2019) and Sweden (Nyman 2017).

In Spain, previous studies have shown that D2D campaigning is uncommon (Morales 2010; Ramiro/Morales 2004), occasionally employed unevenly in small towns and villages primarily for local elections. Bhatti et al. (2019) show initial evidence that in continental Europe, the effect of partisan canvassing seems considerably smaller than in the United States and the United Kingdom. Personalized campaign mobilization methods and strategies may be less effective in political contexts with different electoral campaigning traditions, possibly because citizens are less receptive to means of electoral mobilization that they are not used to, but also possibly because political parties are not well versed in how to effectively run such efforts.

This study adds to the scholarship on personalized and direct partisan electoral campaigning with data from a field experiment of partisan campaign mobilization by the Socialist Party (PSOE) in a local election in Spain. As compared to US elections, Spanish elections focus more on the political parties – rather than individual candidates – and are more centralized in terms of how they are designed and conducted. However, the

Spanish institutional context is one where the personalization of campaigns around party leaders or heads of lists has long been evident (Van Biezen/Hopkin 2005; Rico 2009). Electoral districts are multimember constituencies, and blocked party lists add to the centralized and party-controlled nature of campaigns. Moreover, proportional representation in large districts, such as those in Spain's largest cities, entails that even small electoral gains or losses in local elections can have consequences on the number of local councillors obtained by each party. Given that local elections in large cities in Spain are both highly politically salient and partisan, the field experiment was designed in a setting of high politicization where partisan campaigning stands a good chance of effectiveness.

In this setting of proportional list-based representation, the field experiment was conducted in the Spanish city of Murcia in the context of the Socialist Party (PSOE) campaign for the local elections of May 2011. Murcia is a stronghold of the center-right Partido Popular (PP, People's Party), but four political parties were represented in the local council at the time: PP, PSOE, IU (left-wing Izquierda Unida) and UPyD (centrist Unión, Progreso y Democracia). We assess the mobilization power of four campaign mobilization instruments that vary in the degree to which they entail personal contact, in how intrusive they are, and in their frequency of use in Spanish electoral campaigns: (a) mailbox leaflet delivery of policy proposals; (b) mailbox leaflet delivery of clinic appointments with the head of the list or, as advertised during the campaign, "coffee with the candidate"; (c) face-to-face leaflet distribution on the street; and (d) D2D canvassing.

Given that in Spain personalized methods of campaigning that are intensive in grassroots party mobilization – especially D2D canvassing – are relatively uncommon and that there is a very widespread lack of interest in politics and confidence in politicians (more prevalent than in other comparable democracies), should we expect personalized methods to be as effective as in the US and Britain? As we argue in the next section, there are reasons to believe that the political setting might be a powerful moderator of the effectiveness of various mobilization techniques, and our study constitutes a first attempt at assessing the generalizability of theoretical propositions about campaigning success developed in English-speaking democracies.

Our field experiment in a continental European setting makes several contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it is one of the still very few studies embedded in a real political party campaign, and as such it maximizes the relevance of our design because we randomized several

components of the party strategy. With all the limitations that the partisan nature of the experiment brings, the results can inform about the real-world consequences of the real-world decisions and actions that parties take.

Second, our design allows comparing the effects of a range of campaigning methods – both impersonal and personalized – simultaneously in the same location, thus controlling for the campaign setting. Contrary to the expectations in the literature, we find a small effect of personalized techniques and greater effectiveness of impersonalized ones. Finally, we assess the effect of these partisan mobilization techniques on both voter turnout and party vote share, thus focusing on both the mobilization/activation and persuasion effects of electoral campaigns. Our results are also at odds with many studies in the United States, as we find no effects on turnout and some (modest) effects on vote share, similar to field experiments that have since been conducted elsewhere in Europe (see Bhatti et al. 2019).

The article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature studying how electoral campaigning has evolved to become more professionalized and with fewer face-to-face interactions; and how and when are campaigns effective in mobilizing voters to turn out and vote for the mobilizing parties. We outline the main hypotheses that are extracted from the existing scholarship and we discuss why and how our expectations might differ for other political settings, such as the Spanish one. Section three presents the context in which the experiment took place and its research design. The fourth section presents the results of the experiment. In the last section, we discuss the findings and their implications for future research.

## *2. The effectiveness of campaigning methods from a comparative perspective*

### *2.1 The increasing professionalization of campaigning*

There is widespread consensus that electoral campaigning has been changing in established democracies considerably over the past 40 years, particularly since the 1990s (Kavanagh 1995; Farrell 1996; Holbrook 1996; Farrell/Webb 2000). There are many factors associated with this process (see Mair et al. 2004), but the key ones are the social and political changes (such as voter dealignment) that have led many parties to transform themselves from cadre or mass parties to catch-all parties, as well as the expansion of television and other mass media.

In parallel, political parties have been losing members (Mair/van Biezen 2001; Van Biezen et al. 2012), to the extent that many of them are becoming ‘parties without members’ (Scarrow 2000). These social changes, alongside strategic decisions by political parties, have gradually resulted in an increasing professionalization of electoral campaigning, which has tended to move away from personalized and face-to-face strategies of political mobilization towards impersonal methods (especially through mass media and television ads) and generic electoral material and publications (leaflets, billboards, etc.). Yet, this is not incompatible with an increasingly targeted communication strategy that segments the electorate by age, region, ethnicity, etc., facilitated by the greater professionalization of campaigning and by technological innovations.

Thus, whereas in the ‘pre-modern’ era campaigns were mostly based on face-to-face (F2F) interaction and local parties, since the 1980s electoral campaigns have been transformed to become mass-media-centered events that are professionally run and managed (Norris 2000: ch. 7), and increasingly centralized and marketing-oriented (Farrell 2006). Some scholars identify these trends as reflecting a process of ‘Americanization’ of electoral campaigning that has extended to other countries, particularly Western Europe (Swanson/Mancini 1996). Nevertheless, changes in campaigning are also described as ‘cherry-picking’, where the selective adoption of certain techniques and forms of organizing electoral campaigns define the parties’ strategies (Farrell 2002). Indeed, Dalton et al. (2002) have shown that trends in voters’ involvement in campaign activities – such as attending political meetings, working for parties or candidates, or canvassing – are similarly decreasing in the US and several European democracies.

Regarding the efficacy of campaigns, there is an abundant body of work suggesting that – contrary to prior beliefs – electoral campaigns affect voter turnout and choice. As Holbrook (1996) and Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2002) summarize, the more widespread and traditional position around electoral campaigns in political science is that their effects are limited. From Gosnell’s (1927) work through Lazarsfeld and his colleagues’ seminal research (Berelson et al. 1954; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944), to more recent accounts of campaign effects (Schmitt-Beck 2007), the most frequent conclusion is that campaigns serve to activate voters, but not so much to persuade them into how to vote. But how and when are they effective in achieving these goals, especially the activation goal?

## 2.2 The effectiveness of electoral campaigns

The effectiveness of electoral campaigns has been studied from three different perspectives. One strand of research has focused on examining the extent to which local mobilization efforts and organizational strength affect electoral results and success. Some initial studies suggested that local mobilizing efforts affected turnout but not vote choice (Krassa 1988). Other case studies of local campaigns (Denver/Hands 1997; Seyd/Whiteley 1992) have shown that they are effective in boosting turnout and in improving the results of the concerned parties. Górecki and Marsh (2012) confirm the effect of campaign contact for the Irish case, even when taking into account the (endogenous) effect of geographical proximity between candidates and voters. An extension of these local case studies uses campaign expenditure as a proxy for local campaigning efforts. Pattie, Johnston and their colleagues (Johnston/Pattie 2003, 1997; Pattie et al. 1994; Pattie et al. 1995; Fieldhouse/Cutts 2008) demonstrate that these efforts affect election results, though the effects are greater for challengers than for incumbents (see Carty/Eagles 1999).

A second line of research employs survey evidence and is much larger in scope. Research in this area developed rapidly from Wolfinger's (1963) initial study of the effects of party activism on a local referendum in New Haven, which combined a local study with survey data and showed how local party machines were effective in mobilizing voters in one direction or the other. Similarly, Kramer's (1970) pioneering research used national US survey data to show how doorstep efforts were effective in mobilizing turnout but not in influencing voters' choices. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) disputed this conclusion and argued that canvassing and other forms of direct communication with the voter can be successful in persuading those voters who were anyway likely to turn out to change their vote choice. Since the 2000s, a more sophisticated approach to the subject combines individual-level survey data with information on campaign efforts. For example, McClurg and Holbrook (2009) show not just how campaign activity has an effect on vote choice, but how its effect is related to the way campaigning shapes the impact of core variables that determine voting behavior (ideology, race, presidential approval, evaluations of the economy, etc.).

Finally, a third set of scholarship assesses the effect of various campaigning techniques and strategies with experimental methods. Pioneering experimental studies were conducted by Gosnell (1927) and Eldersveld

(1956), while Boichel and Denver's (1970) work was the first of its kind in the United Kingdom and Europe (for a summary see Michelson/Nickerson 2011). In numerous field experiments, Gerber, Green and colleagues (Gerber/Green 2000; Green et al. 2003; Green/Gerber 2008) demonstrate that mobilization methods that use personal and F2F interaction have substantial effects on voter turnout – sometimes up to 10 percent points increase – and that they are far more effective than impersonal methods, such as telephone calls and direct mail (see also McNulty 2005; but see Dale/Strauss 2009 on the effect of mobile phone text reminders). These experiments have been replicated in the United Kingdom with similar findings (John/Brannan 2006, 2008; Fieldhouse et al. 2013).

In contrast to the abundance of field experiments with non-partisan messages, the number of field experiments conducted in the context of partisan campaigns is rather limited, even in the United States. Although neither Nickerson et al. (2006) nor Panagopoulos (2009a) empirically find substantial differences in the effects of partisan and non-partisan mobilization efforts, there are several reasons why the effects of non-partisan and partisan GOTV campaigns might differ. Non-partisan messages might be more effective because they focus on civic duty and capitalize on the altruism of the appeal. Partisan messages could, instead, be more effective because they are more targeted and they provide more information. Partisan campaigns try to persuade voters to support a candidate or party and, in so doing, provide information about their policy goals and positions, thus possibly contributing to increasing the utility differential (Downs 1957) between the competing candidates or parties.

Most of the few partisan GOTV field experiments that have been conducted in the United States tend to show that partisan grassroots campaigning serves to mobilize turnout but not to change opinions or vote direction (Nickerson 2005; Alvarez et al. 2010; but see Cardy 2005). Yet, Arceneaux (2007) suggests that partisan messages can change beliefs about candidates, and Arceneaux and Kolodny (2009) show that mobilization affects issue preference and issue salience. Further, Barton et al. (2013) show that canvassing by a candidate had a large persuasive effect of increasing the support for the candidate irrespective of the message. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether impersonal methods – such as partisan direct mailing or door hangers – or those with limited interaction – such as phone calls from commercial phone banks – have this turnout-boosting effect too, as some studies have found no significant effect (Gerber et al. 2003; Cardy 2005; McNulty 2005; Panagopoulos 2009a; Barton et al. 2013), while others

report significant positive effects for door hangers and telephone calls (Nickerson et al. 2006; Kling/Stratmann 2022). Some of these studies also suggest that the effectiveness of the campaign contacts will vary depending on the target electorate, with increases in turnout being more noticeable for less habitual voters with an ideological leaning congruent with the partisan message, and with persuasion effects being more likely among undecided voters.

The scholarly literature reviewed here – covering both experimental and observational studies – provides a rather nuanced picture of the effectiveness of partisan electoral campaigns and of the different methods of mobilizing and persuading voters. Campaigns generally matter, though their effects are much clearer in relation to mobilizing the vote and much less so in persuading voters to change the direction of their vote. The body of experimental studies also suggests that campaign techniques that involve greater direct contact and interaction with the voters tend to be more effective.

An open set of theoretical and empirical questions is whether these conclusions about the effectiveness of different personal and impersonal campaign techniques extend to settings with party systems and campaigning traditions that are markedly different from those where they were originally formulated. These questions are not just of theoretical interest; they are particularly relevant for political parties that might benefit from attempting canvassing or other more personal contact methods. In Spain, parties hardly make use of canvassing methods even though the evidence seems to point in the direction of their greater efficacy. Several factors could explain why Spanish parties choose impersonal over F2F methods in their campaigns. Both their relative organizational weakness (party membership is low and they heavily rely on state subsidies) and the fact that the legislation regulating campaign spending allows for the reimbursement of certain mass mailings and reserved television time, provide incentives for much campaigning material to be deployed via impersonal media and the mass media (Pasquino 2001; van Biezen 2000).

The question arises, though, as to whether the same factors that explain why parties in some contexts find it costly to engage in personal campaign methods may also cause those methods to be less efficacious. Strong anti-party sentiments have been linked in Spain (and other South European countries) to a stable, non-reactive manifestation of political disaffection that is behaviorally associated with stable low levels of both conventional (especially party membership and other party-related activity) and uncon-



ventional forms of participation, and with disinterest in politics (Torcal et al. 2002), that coexists with relatively high levels of electoral turnout – on average around 75 percent for national legislative elections.

Thus, it is possible that political parties may be correctly anticipating that F2F campaigning methods are perhaps not effective (or even counterproductive) because voters who are disaffected with traditional ‘party politics’ might either be unaltered by their efforts or even repelled by them (see Bailey et al. 2016 for such a backlash effect). One plausible scenario is that voters, when approached personally to be mobilized and persuaded to vote for a given party, will simply react with skepticism and filter any partisan message through their general mistrust of political parties. This would result in no or very few additional voters being mobilized or persuaded to vote for the mobilizing party. Another more drastic but still plausible, scenario is that voters who are already feeling hostile to political parties will react negatively to a canvasser knocking on their door, partly because they are not used to receiving these visits either during electoral campaigns or between elections. Rather than thinking that the party is interested in them as a voter, alienated citizens can interpret canvassing as a confirmation of their sentiments about parties: ‘They are only interested in our votes’. This second scenario could lead to F2F methods being counterproductive in terms of mobilizing or persuading voters and could possibly fuel abstention.

There are, thus, reasons to think that the effect of canvassing and other F2F methods might be moderated by the political context. However, to date, there is still no empirical assessment of the effect of F2F campaign methods relative to impersonal campaigning in the context of a partisan campaign in continental Europe.

To this aim, we designed and implemented a field experiment during the Socialist Party campaign in the local elections held in Murcia in May 2011. We use the experiment to assess the following set of hypotheses, which are based on the main findings of the literature.

- H1: All mobilization strategies will be more effective in boosting *turnout* than in increasing the *vote share* for the Socialists.
- H2: F2F campaigning (canvassing and street leaflet distribution) will be effective both in mobilizing voter *turnout* (H2a), and in increasing the Socialist *vote share* (H2b).

- H3: F2F campaigning will be *more* effective in mobilizing voter *turnout* (H3a) and in increasing the Socialist *vote share* (H3b) *than* impersonal campaign techniques (mailings).
- H4: F2F campaigning will be *more* effective where previous *turnout* levels were *lower* (H4a) and where the *Socialist vote* was previously *higher* (H4b) [ceiling and predisposition interaction hypotheses].

Although these hypotheses are motivated by previous findings in the literature on voting field experiments in the United States and Britain, they may not be confirmed in other political settings. Our study in the Spanish context provides an initial test of the generalizability of these propositions in a considerably different partisan and campaigning situation and makes several contributions to the existing scholarship. First, our design and hypotheses allow us to examine and compare the effect of four different *types* of campaigning tools in the same electoral context, two of which involve F2F interaction while the other two constitute impersonal variants of campaign mailing. Second, our study is one of the few to assess the relative impact of different campaign strategies on both turnout and vote choice. Thus, we assess whether personal and impersonal campaigning methods have different persuasion effects (if any). Finally, our study was (to our knowledge) the first one to assess with field experiments the effectiveness of various campaigning tools embedded in a real-life partisan campaign in Europe.

### 3. Design of the field experiment and data

#### 3.1 Key aspects of the organization of elections in Spain

Local elections take place in Spain every four years in May in the approximately 8,000 municipalities in the country and they are perceived – and arguably are – by both political parties and the media as highly consequential for national-level politics because they are conducted at once in the whole country. As they also are conducted simultaneously with the regional elections in the majority of Spanish regions, they are seen as a ‘thermometer’ of the national electoral mood and can drive party strategy

for national elections.<sup>2</sup> The May 2011 local elections preceded by a few months the national general elections of November 2011 and, therefore, had the capacity to shape party strategy in the latter. Additionally, voters also perceive them as relevant and electoral participation has remained high in the 2010s and 2020s oscillating between 63 and 67 percent.

In Spanish local elections, the constituency is the whole municipality, which is a single district, and the proportional D'Hondt formula is applied with a minimum threshold of five percent to obtain a local councillor. The local council assemblies are fully renewed through these elections every four years and mayors are elected by a majority (or a plurality) of the local councillors elected by voters. Local assembly sizes vary as a function of the population size of the municipality and can be as small as three councillors and as large as around 60.<sup>3</sup>

For electoral administration purposes, voters and the territory are organized in electoral wards or *census sections* (*secciones censales*), which overlap with the smallest unit of statistical aggregation (in both the population census and the local register or *Padrón*). The electoral law establishes that census sections will have a minimum of 500 registered electors and a maximum of 2,000. Whenever a section goes beyond 2,000 electors it is partitioned into a new one.

In Spain, as a general rule, voters are automatically included in the electoral register when they register as residents in the municipality. Because registration in the municipality is required to access public health services and other public services (schools, all sorts of certifications, etc.) all adult nationals are included in the electoral register.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, up-to-date information exists regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of the

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2 As an illustration of how consequential they can be, the local elections of May 2023 triggered the call for early national general elections by prime minister Pedro Sánchez for July 2023.

3 The law regulating elections in Spain establishes that municipalities of more than 100,000 inhabitants add one councillor per each additional 100,000 inhabitants (or its fraction) to the set number of 25 allocated for municipalities of between 50,001 and 100,000 inhabitants. Madrid is the most populous municipality in the country and has a local assembly formed by 57 councillors.

4 However, they might not be registered in the place where they effectively live if they have not updated their registration to the new locality. Though homeless individuals may not be registered, this is by no means an automatic consequence of homelessness if they were registered in a municipality prior to becoming homeless, as registration does not expire and no continuous proof of residence is required.

residents in all municipalities in Spain, collected also at the census section level.

One important limitation of the Spanish electoral register and the electoral law (and its interpretation) is that researchers cannot access the information relating to whether the individual turned out to vote, as this information is protected by Spanish law as part of the ‘confidentiality of the vote’ constitutional protection. This means that the common strategy employed in the United States and the United Kingdom of designing field experiments by targeting a large number of individuals in one or several electoral wards and then determining who turned out through the electoral roll is not feasible in Spain and would require conducting expensive post-treatment surveys.

### 3.2 Research design and data collection

Given these limitations, to obtain the agreement of a political party to embed an experiment in their electoral campaign (in our case, the Socialist Party, PSOE), we had no other choice but to implement a relatively low-cost field experiment – hence ruling out the possibility of running a pre- and post-electoral survey. As it is not possible to learn about voters’ individual turnout behavior through the electoral register, we decided to randomize census sections, which are the units of treatment, as well as of data collection and analysis.<sup>5</sup>

We conducted the experiments in the Spanish city of Murcia in the run-up period for the local elections of May 22, 2011. Murcia is a large metropolitan city and was the 7<sup>th</sup> largest in Spain with a population of 441,345 at that time. The local assembly elected in 2011 had 29 councillors. For the design of the experiments, we used the information available from the local population register as of January 1, 2010. At that time, Murcia was partitioned into 346 sections, with an average population size of 1,276 inhabitants each. The location was chosen for opportunity reasons.

Murcia is a city where the Socialists obtained roughly 30 percent of the vote and nine councillors in the previous 2007 local elections (with a turnout rate of 66.5 percent) and where the party has historically per-

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5 Arceneaux (2005) compares the results of an experiment when using individual-level and precinct-level information and shows that, when covariates are included, results are relatively similar.

formed poorly for some time compared to the Socialist national average. The main opponent of the Socialists is the center-right *Partido Popular* (PP), which has consistently won the local elections in the municipality of Murcia with a full majority or a plurality in the city since 1995 and obtained 61 percent of the vote in 2007. Yet, the PSOE also competes with the radical-left party, at the time *Izquierda Unida* (IU) – with nearly six percent of the vote in 2007 – and, to a much smaller degree, with the small centrist party *Unión, Progreso y Democracia* (UPyD) that was a newcomer in the 2011 elections.

Similarly to Nickerson et al. (2006), the choice of areas where the field experiment was to take place was determined by partisan mobilization priorities. We preselected the 138 census sections where the PSOE had obtained 30 percent or more of the vote in the previous 2007 local elections (identified as ‘priority’ sections), which accounted for more than 52 percent of the vote that the PSOE had obtained in 2007. Of these, 112 census sections were eventually included in the experiments, and they were assigned as follows: 28 to the mailbox delivery of policy leaflets instrument, 32 to the mailbox delivery of ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflets, 26 to the street leaflet delivery instrument, and 26 to the D2D canvassing instrument.<sup>6</sup> Half of each of these groups were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups (Table 1). None of the sections in the control groups received any treatment, and the experimental groups received exclusively one and only one of the four treatments. One key reason for fragmenting the pool of 112 sections into four parallel non-overlapping experiments was the need to provide the party with information about the effectiveness of the real campaigning options they faced. The party considered putting ‘all the eggs in one basket’ and focusing on just one or two treatments as potentially too risky, hence the ‘real-world’ campaigning constraints forced designing a field experiment that was more fragmented than would be ideal.

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6 For a comparable small-N field experiment on voter turnout see Addonizio et al. (2007).

Table 1: *Distribution of census sections by type of treatment (effectively implemented)*

| Type of treatment         | Treatment | Control |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Mailbox policy leaflets   | 14        | 14      |
| Mailbox “coffee” leaflets | 16        | 16      |
| Street delivery           | 13        | 13      |
| D2D                       | 13        | 13      |
| Non-experimental          |           | 274     |

Before assigning sections to experimental and control groups, as recommended by Imai et al. (2009), we performed block pair matching prior to randomization, to improve the efficiency of our causal effect estimations. We used the 2007 PSOE vote share in the section as the block variable, distinguishing between low (less than or equal to the median value) and high (above the median value) Socialist vote share sections, with a cutoff point of 35 percent.

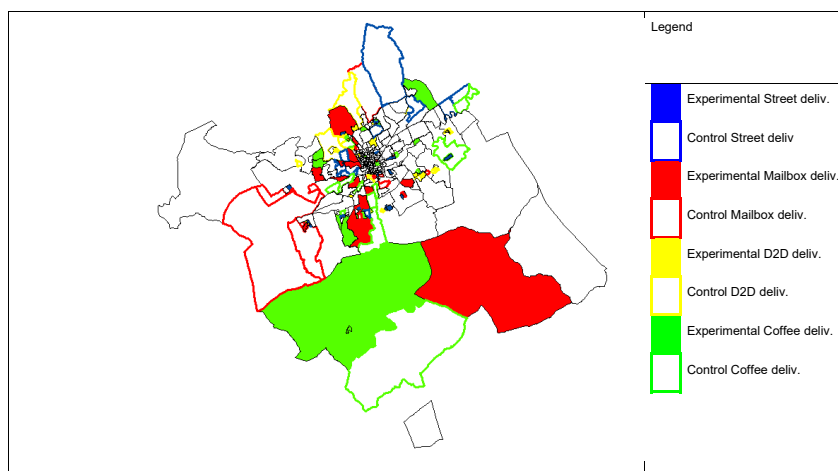
Table 2: *Covariate balance between treatment and control groups*

|                                                     |                | Control | Treat. | P-value |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------|--------|---------|
| <b>Total population</b>                             | Mean           | 1424.8  | 1414.9 | 0.91    |
|                                                     | Std. Deviation | 463.4   | 424.2  |         |
|                                                     | Std. Error     | 61.9    | 56.7   |         |
| <b>Percentage of immigrants</b>                     | Mean           | 13.1    | 13.8   | 0.72    |
|                                                     | Std. Deviation | 8.7     | 9.1    |         |
|                                                     | Std. Error     | 1.2     | 1.2    |         |
| <b>Percentage under 30 years old</b>                | Mean           | 19.9    | 19.9   | 0.86    |
|                                                     | Std. Deviation | 2.4     | 2.2    |         |
|                                                     | Std. Error     | 0.3     | 0.3    |         |
| <b>Percentage turnout in 2007 local elections</b>   | Mean           | 66.7    | 66.8   | 0.96    |
|                                                     | Std. Deviation | 7.2     | 6.1    |         |
|                                                     | Std. Error     | 1.0     | 0.8    |         |
| <b>Percentage PSOE vote in 2007 local elections</b> | Mean           | 35.8    | 35.8   | 0.98    |
|                                                     | Std. Deviation | 6.6     | 6.6    |         |
|                                                     | Std. Error     | 0.9     | 0.9    |         |

The pair-matching within each of these two blocks was performed with blockTools in R (Moore 2010) by minimizing the Mahalanobis multivariate distance for the following variables: total population, percentage of immigrants, percentage of residents under 30 years of age, percentage turnout in 2007, and percentage of vote to the PSOE in 2007. After pairing the sections, each unit within pairs was randomized into experimental and

control groups. Table 2 displays the covariate balance between experimental and control sections for the variables employed in the pair matching, where none of the differences in means is significant. This reassures us that the effects, or lack thereof, of our treatments are not due to differences in the social and political composition of treatment and control sections, though – in any case – we include all these covariates in our models to control for any small differences that might exist.

*Figure 1: The selection of the sections in the territory by experimental instrument*



Source: Cartographic information provided by the Spanish National Statistics Institute, as of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2010. Maps created with ArcMap 10.

Once the sections were paired and randomized, each pair was assigned to one of the groups of campaigning instruments. As in Nickerson et al. (2006), this allocation was not randomized and followed practical constraints. We sought to minimize the ‘contamination’ produced by the street leaflet delivery by selecting into this group those pairs that would allow maximization of the geographical distance between the experimental and control sections – to its pair-matched section but also to other control sections for this campaigning method. We also sought to facilitate successful campaigning in experimental sections by assigning the pairs with more territorially dispersed and difficult-to-cover sections to the mailbox delivery group. Figure 1 shows the location of the selected census sections on a map.

The campaigning activities that required F2F interaction were conducted with party members and volunteers. Street delivery of leaflets took place in up to four rounds – though most census sections were exposed to three rounds of street leafleting – between March 25 and May 13; whereas D2D canvassing was done once in each section between May 9 and May 17.

For mailbox deliveries, the party organization subcontracted two professional companies, one for the mailing of the policy leaflets and the other for the mailing of the ‘coffee with the candidate’ announcements. Both the mailing of the policy leaflets and the ‘coffee with the candidate’ mailing were done twice, and the team of researchers supervised the delivery of a majority of sections.

The leaflets distributed were designed by the local party campaign and emphasized policy proposals or presented the head of the list (the candidate running for mayor). The policy leaflets were printed on both pages of paper longer than an A4 (a 17.5 by 8.3 inches format) and folded into six sides, all similar in style and design to the one included in the Appendix. Each leaflet covered one of six policy areas: quality of life, the economy, environmental policy, urban mobility and transportation, urban planning, and participation. The ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflet was a two-page single leaflet with information on the date, time and location where the candidate would hold the meetings with citizens on one side, and with a letter on the other side (see a sample in the Appendix).

The four campaigning instruments included mobilization mechanisms that the Socialists would typically employ in every election (street delivery and mailbox policy leaflet delivery), one that is used only very sporadically and in a very limited number of areas (D2D canvassing), and one never used before (mailbox delivery of the ‘coffee with the candidate leaflet’). As this was the first time that the local party engaged in such a territorially targeted multi-instrument campaign, one of the researchers was allowed to be ‘embedded’ into the core campaign design team and helped to shape the strategy for these campaigning instruments. The research team also provided the training documents for canvassers and party volunteers and participated in the briefing sessions with these. This close cooperation with the local party organization permitted closer monitoring of the adequate implementation of the various treatments in the targeted census sections and facilitated ensuring that no ‘compensatory’ actions were undertaken in the control sections.

As in most field experiments dealing with the real membership of a real organization, unexpected deviations from the original plans happened.



The first mailing of the ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflet failed to be distributed in two of the 16 treatment census sections due to a coordination problem. Similarly, the first round of mailbox deliveries of policy leaflets only reached 10 of the 14 treatment sections. Although all sections treated with street delivery of leaflets were going to be visited three times between late March and the election date, 6 of 13 ended up receiving an additional compensatory visit because one of the programmed visits had resulted in too few leaflets delivered, due to unusually bad weather. Regarding D2D canvassing, the local party organization was unable to complete the task in two of the 15 sections allocated to this campaign instrument, with no other major incidents. We control for deviations in our analyses to the best of our ability.

Overall, the field experiment was carried out largely as planned. The one aspect that was not possible to achieve was an accurate record of the success of deliveries. Although we established protocols for recording the number of leaflets delivered and homes visited, the information received from the mailing companies and the canvassing teams was too incomplete to be of use as a proxy for effective treatment. Hence, we can only analyze the intent-to-treat (ITT) effects of the experiment.

Nevertheless, the information we have for some of the sections indicates that street leafleting reached, on average, around 200 individuals per visit (with a minimum of 60 and a maximum of 600), which is a low penetration rate if one considers that the average census section contains around 1,300 electors. In contrast, D2D canvassing and mailings were more productive on average, as around 300 households (one-third of the average number of households per section) received a leaflet through canvassing, and an average of 70 percent of households received the mailings.

The overall cost of the experiment was approximately 9,000 euros, most of which went to printing and mailing costs. Party members and volunteers were not remunerated for their leafleting or canvassing work, nor reimbursed for transportation costs. The ‘coffee with the candidate’ activities were organized in public spaces available for free for campaign events.

Outside of the experimental treatments, the Socialist Party engaged in other ‘usual’ campaign activities. The national headquarters organized a non-targeted mass mailing aimed at all registered voters including a letter from the national and local party leaders and the voting ballots, as is traditional in Spain for all elections. The local party sent additional mailings to the residents of 70 of the ‘priority’ sections, but these sections were carefully selected by the research team to ensure a balanced composition

of treatment and control sections so that they would not interfere with the experiment. Other activities the local party organized included several types of small-scale meetings of the mayoral candidate with citizens and civil society representatives, party rallies, canvassing walks in marketplaces, and street theatre events with and without the candidate. We were able to collect information on the areas where these other activities took place and we included variables to control for their potential effects in our models.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1 Effects of the experimental interventions on turnout

The results in Table 3 suggest that the mobilization methods used by the PSOE in our field experiments did not increase turnout rates as a whole. We observe no statistically significant or substantive impact on overall levels of voter turnout for any of the four campaign mobilization instruments, and the differences between treatment and control groups only go in the expected direction for the mailings of the ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflet. Unlike much of the field experiments in the US and the UK that often find turnout boosts of more than 0.5 percent per mailing and of more than five percent for canvass treatments – with some of the effects recorded for early experiments in the 1920s, 1950s and 1980s reaching double digits (see Table 1 in Gerber/Green 2000) – our effects are considerably smaller and hence not just statistically insignificant.<sup>7</sup>

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7 The experiment was not pre-registered as in 2010, when it was designed, pre-registration platforms were not yet common. The calculation of the statistical power of our experiments was done with G\*Power 3.1 for Mac (Faul et al. 2007) and is dependent on each of the sub-experiments and the expectations of the size of the effect. Nevertheless, pair-matching considerably increases the efficiency of our estimations (and hence, improves power for our relatively small sample sizes). For example, with an expected increase in turnout of eight per cent for the D2D experiment ( $n=13$  per group) that is found in some GOTV experiments in the United States (e.g., an expected mean turnout of 60 per cent for the control group and an expected mean turnout of 68 per cent for the treatment group, with a standard deviation of 5), the statistical power is 0.99. For an expected boost of only five percentage points, the statistical power of the D2D canvassing experiment is reduced to 0.97. For an expected boost of only two percentage points, the statistical power is further reduced to 0.40. Hence, undoubtedly, our sample sizes limit our ability to detect very small turnout (or party choice) increases. However, regardless of statistical significance, the main issue is that we do not find substantively relevant differences in turnout either.

Table 3: Percentage turnout per type of treatment

| Type of treatment               | Pair                   | Control     | Treatment   | N      |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------|
| Policy leaflet mailbox delivery | Average                | 65.1        | 65.1        | 14/14  |
|                                 | ANOVA: p-value=0.97    | (3.5)       | (4.8)       |        |
|                                 | Paired samples t-test: |             |             |        |
|                                 | p-value= 0.96          |             |             |        |
| Coffee leaflet mailbox delivery | Average                | <b>66.1</b> | <b>67.0</b> | 16 /16 |
|                                 | ANOVA: p-value=0.71    | (7.5)       | (6.0)       |        |
|                                 | Paired samples t-test: |             |             |        |
|                                 | p-value= 0.62          |             |             |        |
| Street canvassing               | Average                | 66.3        | 66.1        | 13/13  |
|                                 | ANOVA: p-value=0.96    | (8.3)       | (3.6)       |        |
|                                 | Paired samples t-test: |             |             |        |
|                                 | p-value= 0.95          |             |             |        |
| Door to door canvassing         | Average                | 67.5        | 65.9        | 13/13  |
|                                 | ANOVA: p-value=0.57    | (5.4)       | (7.6)       |        |
|                                 | Paired samples t-test: |             |             |        |
|                                 | p-value= 0.15          |             |             |        |

Standard deviations in parentheses. Results consistent with the expected direction of the effect are displayed in bold.

Of course, it could well be that these mobilization campaigns boosted the turnout of Socialist-leaning voters while depressing the turnout of all other voters to equivalent degrees (see Foos/John 2018 for such a mechanism in the United Kingdom). However, this is not very likely, as none of the leaflets distributed were designed as negative campaign messages about the contenders, though they included critical messages against the incumbent PP. In any case, we will reconsider this potential explanation when we discuss the results on the vote share for the Socialists.

The multivariate models in Table 4 corroborate the ineffectiveness of the Socialist campaign in increasing turnout levels, once we control for all the relevant covariates. None of the treatments increased turnout levels and, if anything, mobilization seems to depress turnout, though the large error terms imply that the effect is most likely nil. We do not find any evidence either that the effect of F2F campaigning on turnout is dependent on prior levels of turnout in the census section, as the interaction term is also indistinguishable from zero.

These findings lend no support to the hypotheses found in the scholarship about the effects of campaigning on turnout in the Spanish setting studied. Hence, we find no evidence that F2F campaigning had a discernible effect on turnout (H2a). We also find no evidence of F2F canvassing

being more effective in mobilizing voter turnout than mailings (H3a), or of its greater effectiveness where previous turnout levels were lower (H4a). In short, we found no evidence of an impact of F2F campaigning on turnout levels in the context analyzed. These findings are consistent with those returned for comparable experiments in other continental European countries (see Townsley 2018; Bhatti et al. 2019).

Table 4: Effects of the experimental interventions on turnout (OLS)

|                                          | Model 1 |         |    | Model 2 |         |    | Model 3 |         |    |
|------------------------------------------|---------|---------|----|---------|---------|----|---------|---------|----|
|                                          | Coef.   | (s.e. ) |    | Coef.   | (s.e. ) |    | Coef.   | (s.e. ) |    |
| Intercept                                | 19.9    | (3.80)  | ** | 20.0    | (3.76)  | ** | 20.3    | (4.10)  | ** |
| <i>Experiment variables</i>              |         |         |    |         |         |    |         |         |    |
| Mailbox – policy leaflets                | -1.2    | (1.11)  |    |         |         |    |         |         |    |
| Mailbox – coffee leaflets                | -1.1    | (1.92)  |    |         |         |    |         |         |    |
| Street delivery                          | -1.3    | (1.08)  |    |         |         |    |         |         |    |
| Door to door                             | -1.6    | (1.04)  |    |         |         |    |         |         |    |
| Any treatment                            |         |         |    | -1.2    | (1.09)  |    | -1.2    | (1.10)  |    |
| Face-to-face treat. (vs mailbox treat.)  |         |         |    | -0.3    | (0.98)  |    | -1.8    | (7.98)  |    |
| F2F * % turnout 2007                     |         |         |    |         |         |    | 0.0     | (0.12)  |    |
| Days contact before election day         | 0.1     | (0.06)  |    | 0.1     | (0.04)  | *  | 0.1     | (0.04)  | *  |
| <i>Control variables</i>                 |         |         |    |         |         |    |         |         |    |
| % immigrants                             | 0.0     | (0.04)  |    | 0.0     | (0.04)  |    | 0.0     | (0.04)  |    |
| % turnout 2007                           | 0.8     | (0.05)  | ** | 0.8     | (0.05)  | ** | 0.8     | (0.05)  | ** |
| % PSOE 2007                              | -0.1    | (0.05)  | ** | -0.1    | (0.05)  | ** | -0.1    | (0.05)  | ** |
| <i>Other campaign activities by PSOE</i> |         |         |    |         |         |    |         |         |    |
| Meeting w/ candidate                     | -1.4    | (0.77)  | *  | -1.4    | (0.76)  | *  | -1.4    | (0.76)  | *  |
| Show w/ candidate                        | 0.3     | (0.67)  |    | 0.3     | (0.66)  |    | 0.3     | (0.66)  |    |
| Show without candidate                   | 1.6     | (1.65)  |    | 1.6     | (1.63)  |    | 1.6     | (1.64)  |    |
| Other meetings                           | 0.1     | (0.78)  |    | 0.1     | (0.77)  |    | 0.1     | (0.77)  |    |
| Markets walk                             | -1.1    | (0.74)  |    | -1.1    | (0.73)  |    | -1.1    | (0.73)  |    |
| No. of cases                             | 112     |         |    | 112     |         |    | 112     |         |    |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>                      | 0.73    |         |    | 0.73    |         |    | 0.73    |         |    |

Significance levels: \* p≤0.10 \*\* p≤0.05

4.2 Effects of the experimental interventions on the Socialist vote

We now analyze the effects of campaign mobilization on the vote for the PSOE. Table 5 shows the results per type of treatment. The only treatment that has a clear and positive effect on the Socialist vote is the mailbox delivery of policy leaflets with an average increase of nearly four percentage points in the vote for the party.<sup>8</sup> For the mailbox delivery of ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflets and D2D canvassing, the difference in the average vote for control and treatment groups is almost inexistent. For street delivery of policy leaflets, there is some evidence that the effect might be negative but small, as treated sections displayed on average two percent less Socialist vote than control ones.

Table 5: Percentage votes for PSOE per type of treatment

| Type of treatment                          | Pair                                    | Non-experi-<br>mental or con-<br>trol | Treatment    | N     |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------|-------|
| <b>Policy leaflet mailbox<br/>delivery</b> | Average                                 | <b>20.45</b>                          | <b>24.29</b> | 14/14 |
|                                            | ANOVA: p-value=0.04                     | (2.1)                                 | (6.2)        |       |
|                                            | Paired samples t-test:<br>p-value= 0.05 |                                       |              |       |
| <b>Coffee leaflet mailbox<br/>delivery</b> | Average                                 | 22.87                                 | 22.59        | 16/16 |
|                                            | ANOVA: p-value=0.91                     | (7.1)                                 | (6.2)        |       |
|                                            | Paired samples t-test:<br>p-value= 0.87 |                                       |              |       |
| <b>Street canvassing</b>                   | Average                                 | 24.03                                 | 21.80        | 13/13 |
|                                            | ANOVA: p-value=0.28                     | (5.2)                                 | (5.0)        |       |
|                                            | Paired samples t-test:<br>p-value= 0.04 |                                       |              |       |
| <b>Door to door canvassing</b>             | Average                                 | 24.67                                 | 24.31        | 13/13 |
|                                            | ANOVA: p-value=0.87                     | (5.4)                                 | (5.5)        |       |
|                                            | Paired samples t-test:<br>p-value= 0.84 |                                       |              |       |

Standard deviations in parentheses. Results consistent with the expected direction of the effect are displayed in bold.

8 The power calculations for an expected increase of four percentage points in the vote share of the PSOE (e.g., with the control group at 20 per cent and the treatment group at 24 per cent, with a standard deviation of 4 for each) is 0.98 for a sample size of 14 per group.

Thus, so far, the findings suggest that mobilization strategies perform differently in the Spanish context than what was previously found in the United States and Britain. Yet, several aspects might have interfered with our treatments, as field experiments are never conducted in fully ‘controlled’ environments, hence we also assess the effects of experimental treatments while controlling for important covariates.

Table 6: *Effects of the experimental interventions on the vote share for the Socialist party (OLS)*

|                                          | Model 1 |        |    | Model 2 |        |    | Model 3 |        |    |
|------------------------------------------|---------|--------|----|---------|--------|----|---------|--------|----|
|                                          | Coef.   | (s.e.) |    | Coef.   | (s.e.) |    | Coef.   | (s.e.) |    |
| Intercept                                | -10.3   | (3.99) | ** | -10.5   | (3.97) | ** | -9.2    | (4.01) | ** |
| <b>Treatment variables</b>               |         |        |    |         |        |    |         |        |    |
| Mailbox – policy leaflets                | 2.3     | (1.16) | ** | --      |        |    | --      |        |    |
| Mailbox – coffee leaflets                | 2.4     | (2.02) |    | --      |        |    | --      |        |    |
| Street delivery                          | -0.5    | (1.14) |    | --      |        |    | --      |        |    |
| Door to door                             | 0.7     | (1.09) |    | --      |        |    | --      |        |    |
| Any treatment                            | --      |        |    | 2.4     | (1.15) | ** | 2.5     | (1.14) | ** |
| Face to face treat. (vs mailbox treat.)  | --      |        |    | -2.2    | (1.03) | ** | -9.0    | (4.28) | ** |
| F2F * %PSOE 2007                         | --      |        |    | --      |        |    | 0.2     | (0.11) | *  |
| Days contact before election day         | -0.1    | (0.06) | *  | -0.1    | (0.04) | ** | -0.1    | (0.04) | ** |
| <b>Control variables</b>                 |         |        |    |         |        |    |         |        |    |
| % immigrants                             | 0.1     | (0.04) | ** | 0.1     | (0.04) | ** | 0.1     | (0.04) | ** |
| % turnout 2007                           | 0.1     | (0.05) | ** | 0.1     | (0.05) | ** | 0.2     | (0.05) | ** |
| % PSOE 2007                              | 0.6     | (0.05) | ** | 0.6     | (0.05) | ** | 0.6     | (0.06) | ** |
| <b>Other campaign activities by PSOE</b> |         |        |    |         |        |    |         |        |    |
| Meeting w/ candidate                     | 2.1     | (0.81) | ** | 2.2     | (0.80) | ** | 2.3     | (0.79) | ** |
| Show w/ candidate                        | -0.2    | (0.71) |    | -0.1    | (0.69) |    | -0.1    | (0.69) |    |
| Show without candidate                   | 1.5     | (1.73) |    | 1.6     | (1.72) |    | 1.9     | (1.71) |    |
| Other meetings                           | 3.2     | (0.82) | ** | 3.2     | (0.81) | ** | 3.4     | (0.81) | ** |
| Markets walk                             | 0.8     | (0.78) |    | 0.8     | (0.77) |    | 0.6     | (0.77) |    |
| No. of cases                             | 112     |        |    | 112     |        |    | 112     |        |    |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>                      | 0.66    |        |    | 0.66    |        |    | 0.67    |        |    |

Significance levels: \*  $p \leq 0.10$  \*\*  $p \leq 0.05$

The results in Table 6 allow a proper examination of the hypotheses laid out with regard to the effects of various campaigning methods on the Socialist vote. Starting with the hypothesis that F2F campaigning is effective in increasing the Socialist vote (H2b), the results in Model 1 suggest

that this is not the case. Neither street delivery of leaflets nor D2D canvassing significantly (or substantially) increased the vote to the PSOE in experimental sections when compared to control sections. Instead, mailbox delivery of leaflets seems to be more effective, increasing the Socialist vote by around two percentage points – though the coefficient is significant only for the mailing of policy leaflets. Thus, at least in this context, F2F campaigning seems to have been largely ineffective.

This is corroborated by the results in Model 2, which allow us to assess H3b (whether F2F campaigning is more effective in increasing the Socialist vote than impersonal campaign techniques). Indeed, the results clearly show that F2F methods are much less effective in mobilizing the Socialist vote than the two mailbox treatments and that their overall effect is negligible ( $2.37 - 2.22 = 0.15$ ). Yet, Model 3 indicates that the effectiveness of F2F campaigning is greater in the areas where the Socialist vote was previously higher (consistent with H4b positing a predisposition conditional effect), as the interaction term is positive. Thus, for example, in sections with 30 percent of the vote for the PSOE in 2007, F2F treatments had a somewhat negative effect ( $-0.87$ ), whereas in sections with 40 percent of the vote, these treatments had a small but positive effect ( $1.03$ ). These results are consistent with the scholarship that suggests that, rather than persuading or mobilizing new voters, campaigns serve primarily to activate the predisposed partisan or leaning voters, and they also lend some plausibility to our suggestion that less partisan voters might be repelled by a party knocking on their door, given the high levels of anti-party sentiment in Spain and the absence of a canvassing tradition.

Moreover, even though our experiment was not designed to look specifically at this, our results indicate that campaign contacts that were more distant to election day had less of an impact than those closest to it, as each day reduces the effectiveness of the campaign intervention by between a tenth and a quarter of a percentage point.

When we conduct analyses equivalent to those included in Table 6 but predicting the vote for the main competitors of the PSOE – the center-right PP, the left-wing IU and the moderate UPyD – (not shown) we find that all four experimental interventions either decreased the vote for these parties or had no effect. In some cases, this negative effect on the competitors' vote was statistically significant: D2D canvassing by the PSOE reduced by three percentage points the PP vote, and mailbox delivery of policy leaflets and of the 'coffee with the candidate' leaflets reduced by around two percentage points each the vote to IU. These findings are both interesting and poten-

tially consequential as, given how mobilization strategies were designed, the party cannot target only their own voters within a given census section and all voters are approached indistinctly. Moreover, they might lend some plausibility to the aforementioned speculation that the campaign efforts did not increase turnout because, possibly, they also contributed to demobilizing the electorate of other parties.

In summary, our findings suggest that the effectiveness of various partisan campaigning methods in the studied Spanish context differs from those common in past American and British scholarship. F2F canvassing is not effective in mobilizing the vote for the party that undertakes it, whereas campaigning methods that are usually thought of as ineffective – mailings – turn out to yield a modest but consistent and significant gain.

## 5. Conclusion

This article makes several contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it provides field-experimental data for Spain assessing whether some of the campaign techniques that have been shown to increase voter turnout and partisan vote share in the United States and other English-speaking democracies can be transferred successfully to other political contexts. The results of our field experiment in Murcia, alongside those found in other contexts, question the generalizability of some of the findings that originated in the American and British context regarding the effect of campaign mobilization on electoral outcomes. The existing scholarship suggests that F2F mobilization is effective in boosting turnout and mobilizing the targeted voters and that engaging in such resource-intensive activities typically pays off. Equally, the existing consensus is that impersonal methods of campaigning are usually not very effective in getting through the campaign messages or enticing the electorate. Our findings alert to potential problems in the generalizability of both of these conclusions to contexts where F2F methods such as D2D canvassing are uncommon. Our experimental design allows considering simultaneously the effectiveness of a variety of campaign techniques, both personalized and impersonal, while controlling for the electoral setting.

In Spain, personalized forms of campaigning tend to be low-key, uncommon (especially in urban areas) and, when done at all, organized in an unsystematic way and without targeting specific party-leaning voters. Given the consensus in the findings stemming from the party campaigning



literature in English-speaking democracies that suggest that personalized mobilization is very effective, one could not help but wonder if Spanish parties were settling for suboptimal campaign strategies. Yet, our results are not in line with the received wisdom regarding the effectiveness of F2F mobilization in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Most of the hypotheses extracted from the existing scholarship did not find support in the results of our field experiment. Contrary to Hypothesis 1, the various campaign strategies examined were not more effective in boosting turnout than in boosting the partisan vote (for the PSOE). Contrary to Hypotheses 2a and 2b, F2F mobilization strategies were not effective in increasing turnout or in increasing the Socialist vote share. Contrary to Hypotheses 3a and 3b, F2F campaigning methods were not more effective than mailings in boosting turnout or the Socialist vote, if anything the opposite. Finally, the only interaction effect we found in relation to previous electoral outcomes was that F2F campaigning seems to be more effective where the Socialist vote was higher in previous elections (consistent with H4b on effects conditional on predisposition), as the effectiveness of F2F campaigning was not connected to prior turnout levels (we found no ceiling effect). Clearly, our field experiment is small and our statistical power admittedly limited, yet we believe this is sufficient evidence to at least raise questions about the potential generalizability of previous findings in the United States and Britain to other democratic settings. Jointly considered with the findings by Townsley (2018), Foos and John (2018), Pons (2018) and Bhatti et al. (2019), which all point to partisan canvassing having no effect on voter turnout, our results at the very least suggest that further evidence is needed to assess our capacity to generalize from those US and UK cases. Existing findings about the effect on party choice are mixed and will require more systematic and comparable research.

Second, our paper suggests that the electoral effects of mobilization may not necessarily be restricted to turnout increases or support boosts for the party mobilizing, but that they might depress the support for the rival parties. However, given that we found no evidence that D2D or street canvassing boosted the vote for the Socialists, even if D2D canvassing seemed to significantly reduce the vote share of the main contender (the incumbent PP) by three percentage points, it is unclear if the mobilizing party will find this strategy worth the effort. By contrast, the mailing of policy-oriented leaflets proved unexpectedly effective in boosting the Socialist vote, while also reducing the support for one of its other contenders (IU). These results are at odds with the general assumption in the scholarship that impersonal

forms of campaigning are mostly innocuous and that personal mobilization is the optimal way to obtain large electoral gains (see findings in Townsley 2018, and Foos/John 2018 showing similar effectiveness of leaflets and personal visits).

An additional important finding that has not been emphasized in the extant literature (but see Gerber/Rogers 2009; Nickerson 2006, 2007; Panagopoulos 2011) is that the timing of the contact to election day seems to matter. Consistent with Nickerson's (2007) findings and in contrast to Panagopoulos' (2011) results, our experiment suggests that contacts are more effective closer to election day. However, this effectiveness translates into an increase in the Socialist vote share, rather than on turnout rates. This lends support to Panagopoulos' claim that the effect of timing is complex and deserves further research.

The findings of this experiment need to be interpreted in relation to the impossibility of measuring effective treatment rates. In the absence of this information, our results only inform of ITT effects. The consequence is that 'compliance' or 'penetration' rates vary substantially across types of treatment, and our evidence (aided by casual observation) is suggestive of lower compliance rates for the F2F campaign methods than for the mailings. This should nuance our conclusions, given that it could be pointing to strong threshold effects for the causal effectiveness of F2F methods in the Spanish context. We are, in any case, in a position to assess the cost-effectiveness relative to realistic penetration rates of each of these campaigning methods, and this type of statement is ultimately the one that is of relevance in the determination of party strategies.

A final corollary, in view of our findings showing the very limited effectiveness of any of the campaign methods on voter turnout, is that our paper casts doubt on the idea that less personalized forms of campaigning might be causing turnout reduction (Wattenberg 2002). If party mobilization has limited effects on turnout, at least in certain contexts, party campaigning styles might not be to blame for downward turnout trends in many established democracies.

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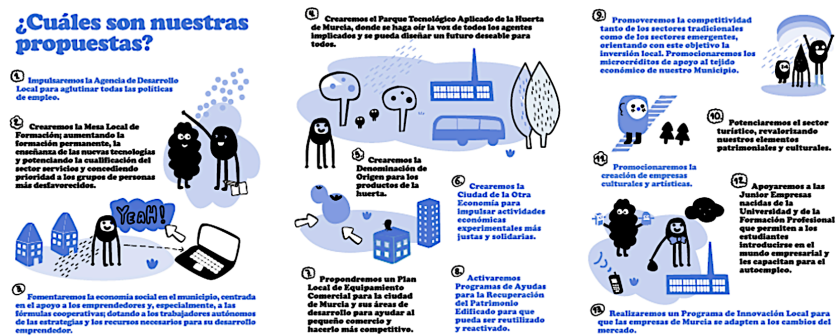


## APPENDIX: Campaign materials

### Example of a policy leaflet



### External side



### Internal side

Example of a ‘Coffee with the candidate’ leaflet



**31 de marzo**  
**17:00 h. /**  
**"Café con el candidato"**  
**Biblioteca de**  
**Cabezo de Torres**  
**Próximo "Café con el**  
**candidato", 28 de abril a las**  
**17:00 h**

**Pedro**  
**López**  
**Candidato**  
**a la Alcaldía de Murcia**  
**Contamos todos\***

Murcia  
11010

\* Todos somos todos

**Pedro**  
**López**  
**Candidato**  
**a la alcaldía de Murcia**  
**Contamos todos\***



Pedro López (murcia.es)

En Murcia a 28 de febrero de 2011

**Estimado vecino:**

Mi nombre es Pedro López y presento mi candidatura a la alcaldía de Murcia en las próximas elecciones municipales del mes de mayo.

[El motivo de la presente no es otro que invitarte a tomar un café conmigo el próximo **jueves 31 de marzo**, a partir de las 17:00 h en las instalaciones de la Biblioteca del Cabezo de Torres. Por si no pudieras asistir este mes, véngeme el **jueves 28 de abril**].

Una de las compromisos centrales de mi proyecto es fomentar abiertamente la participación de los ciudadanos en la gestión de la vida pública, porque me da igual que los habitantes de cada barrio, de cada pedanía, de cada asociación, para conocer de primera mano cuáles son sus necesidades.

La iniciativa que hemos denominado **"Café con el Candidato"**, brinda a los vecinos de los diferentes pedanías y barrios del municipio, la oportunidad de conversar en privado conmigo, de manera informal y relajada, sobre todos aquellos cuestiones que les preocupan.

Si eres particular, agradeceré una vez más mi intención por tu asistencia y recordarte que puedes contactar personalmente conmigo en el 861 402 001, y en la web [www.contamostodos.com](http://www.contamostodos.com)

Recibe un cordial saludo

Atentamente,  
**Pedro López Hernández.**

\* Todos, somos todos