Awakened: The Potential for Mobilization to Reshape Interest in Politics

Gabriel Nahmias *MIT Political Science*
August 12, 2019

Interest in politics has been repeatedly shown to be a substantively important precursor to political participation. Unfortunately, sources of its variation beyond childhood socialization remain under-explored. This is likely due to a widespread belief that interest is intractable: "You've either got it or you don't." I argue that by exposing the disengaged to political stimuli, infiltrative political campaigns can instigate and interest in politics. This potential is tested using a well-established most-likely case: the 2012 presidential campaign. Panel data indicates that residents of battleground states exhibit a notable increase in political interest between 2010 and 2014 compared to those in "spectator" states and an alternative specification using field office placement implicates campaign mobilization directly in precipitating this change. The magnitude of the estimated effect is equivalent to over 150,000 entirely disinterested North Carolinians becoming fully engaged who would have remained apathetic had they lived in Georgia. The change is concentrated among those without college degrees, indicating mobilization may compensate for marginalizing socioe-conomic conditions. Further evidence indicates the effect resulted in increased political knowledge and lingered into 2016. Overall, this analysis demonstrates that political mobilization can shift interest and underscores the importance of understanding how recruitment can positively reshape the engagment of the electorate.

Keywords: Mobilization, Political Interest, Motivation, Political Participation, Campaigns, Battleground States

1. Introduction

If an abstention from voting was counted as a ballot for "Nobody," then Nobody would have won the 2016 US presidential election by 445 electoral votes. The great struggle in a democracy is not between left and right, it is between apathy and engagement. For representative government to function accountably requires that politics arouses citizens' curiosity. *Interest in politics*[1] is the single best predictor of political participation[2] (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995), a finding which has been replicated across the globe (for example Carreras and Irepoglu 2013 in Latin America; Kuenzi and Lambright 2011 in Africa; Soderlund, Wass, and

[1]Political interest is the level of general psychological engagement a citizen has with the political system, the "degree to which politics arouses a citizen's curiosity" (Deth 1990). It is often captured with measures such as "how much do you follow politics."

[2]The only political act for which interest was not the best predictor is donating money. Having money is the single best predictor for donating money, interest in politics is the second best.

Blais 2011 in Europe). Political interest is further correlated with political knowledge (Galston 2001) and greater coherence in political belief systems (Converse 1962). And as a result, it is often viewed as the cornerstone of democratic engagement (Blais, Galais, and Bowler 2014). Yet, our understanding of how political interest changes remains underdeveloped, a fact which scholars have noted periodically for the past two decades (Prior 2018; J. Miller and Saunders 2016; Han 2009; Fiorina 2002; Brady 1999).

The dominant belief is that political interest, once formed during youth, is largely static: "You've either got it or you don't" (Prior 2010, 1). Elections are thought to be ineffective engines of motivation (Prior 2018) because campaigns target the engaged (Hersh 2015) and get out the vote efforts are most effective among the already motivated (Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck 2013). While acknowledging the general stability of political interest, I argue we should resurrect and amend an earlier view that political mobilization can change an individual's dispositional interest in politics (e.g. Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). I demonstrate that campaign mobilization, when sufficiently infiltrative, can develop a dispositional political interest among the structurally disengaged. I do this by investigating the effect of the 2012 presidential campaign.

In US presidential elections, disproportional mobilization efforts are directed at "battleground states." This allows for the evaluation of the aggregate impact of campaigns, not just the occurrence of an election, on political behavior (Enos and Fowler 2016). Using panel data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), I show that living in a battleground state during the 2012 election is associated with a notable increase in reported political interest in 2014 compared to 2010.

I further show that this effect is limited to on-the-ground campaign mobilization, as county-level campaign office placement entirely absorbs the correlation between battleground status and change in interest in politics. Moreover, the association is substantially stronger for Obama's campaign, which famously relied on community organizing strategies (McKenna and Han 2014), than it is for Romney's. Together, this indicates that to augment psychological engagement campaigns must be sufficiently "infiltrative" so as to create, what Prior terms, "inadvertent political encounters" (2018).

I estimate that living in a battleground state in 2012 had an equivalent impact on

subsequent political interest to acquiring an additional diploma or degree. This result is particularly important as the observed association is concentrated among the less educated, suggesting mobilization may compensate for disadvantageous socio-economic conditions and is indeed most effective on those most likely to be ignored by political campaigns. The repercussions of this augmented interest are tangible, effecting both voting behavior and political knowledge. Moreover, 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) data indicates that the effect on interest is durable.

Given the well-documented importance of political interest for political behavior, identifying the factors that may alter it over an individual's lifetime is essential to the formation of a more democratic society. This is in spite of, or perhaps because of, interest's general rigidity. I demonstrate that political campaigns, especially infiltrative campaigns such as those embarked on by President Obama, may be one such factor. In doing so, this paper motivates greater research into understanding how *dispositional* political interest may be created.

2. Motivating the Disinterested

Advocates of increased political participation often focus on the structural factors which influence the material costs of participation. This privileging of opportunity follows from Brady et al.'s famous inversion of the question "why do people participate in politics?" to "why they don't?" (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). While reforms such as suffrage or enforced compulsory voting have been shown to increase participation, it is less clear that minor reduction to barriers substantially affect turnout, particularly among the disadvantaged. For example, voter identification laws seem to have had "modest, if any, turnout effects" (Highton 2017, 149), vote by mail had a negligible impact on participation (Gronke and Miller 2012), and "motor voter" may have actually increased the racial and class bias of the electorate (Martinez and Hill 1999). Moreover, panel data indicates that changes in interest and efficacy predict individual variation in participation over time, while changes in resources do not (J. Miller and Saunders 2016). The point is simply that *for the unmotivated, even if the cost of voting is nothing, they still will not vote.*

Yet, compared to resources, motivation is relatively understudied. The most significant

reason for this omission is the (well-founded) perception that political interest is, at the individual-level, extremely stable. It is seen as a "permanent disposition" (Sapiro 2004, 3), a static product of biography and socialization (as noted in Han 2009, 14), and a function of underlying personality traits (Mattila et al. 2011). During childhood, parents and peers may influence a person's interest in politics (Shehata and Amna 2017), but by adulthood, interest has calcified (Emmenegger, Marx, and Schraff 2016). Indeed, Prior's thorough analysis of eleven panel surveys found remarkable consistency of political interest between waves (2010).

Despite its general stability, interest can change. The aforenoted multi-panel study also showed that a particularly dramatic event - the reunification of Germany - did lead to a substantial shift in political interest (Prior 2010). Moreover, it is very well documented that as an adult ages their interest tends to increase (Glenn and Grimes 1968; Goerres 2007), and that this effect is associated with political circumstances (Campbell 2003). Finally, as mentioned, empirically *some* variation does exist in panel studies and this variation is associated with changes in political participation (J. Miller and Saunders 2016). If political interest is highly consistent, the existence of factors which might produce shifts in interests, especially if these can be constructed, becomes more significant and worthy of identifying. Are political campaigns one such factor?

Panel data from the US and Germany indicates that, in general, interest in politics does not seem to fluctuate substantially around elections (Prior 2018). This is due to the fact that "People become involved in politics because they want politics, not because politics wants them" (Prior 2018, 4). Political interest and disinterest are self-reinforcing, as the disinterest simply tune out politics, never evaluating their disengagement. Ignoring elections is quite easy most of the time, especially given most campaigns purposefully avoid the disengaged (Hersh 2015).

However, Prior provides a potential logic for how elections may sometimes be motivating. There are two types of disengaged citizens. The actively disinterest have been regularly confronted by politics and decided they do not like it. Their low levels of interest are reliable and unlikely to be affected by mobilization. However, Prior points out that many people may be passively disinterested. These individuals lack the situational exposures to politics to cultivate an interest and, as a result, simply default to avoidance due to an "inkling" that they dislike it. As a result, "Experiences with politics have the greatest potential to raise political

interest when they cannot be avoided or are inadvertent" (Prior 2018, 39) as these exposures have the potential to ratchet up the passively disinterested's engagement. Thus, the more a campaign is unavoidable and the more it reaches those with less lifetime political exposure, the more likely it is to influence interest. In other words, it is not elections per se which matter to changing political interest, but difficult to avoid, "infiltrative", campaign mobilization.

3. Case Selection: The 2012 Campaign

I make use of the 2012 presidential campaign as a case of infiltrative campaign mobilization. Presidential elections are massive recruitment shocks, fueled by billions of dollars, disrupting people's lives. However, who is affected by these campaigns is not evenly distributed among the US population. Almost all of the time, effort, and financial resources of campaigns are targeted at a collection of "battleground" states. Due to their relative competitiveness and the structure of the US electoral college, these states have a disproportional influence on the outcome of the presidency. The United States is therefore divided into a set of battleground states who experience a mobilization shock and a collection of "spectator" states, which are plausible counterfactuals experiencing far less campaign mobilization. Enos and Fowler estimate that battleground state campaigns during the 2012 presidential election mobilized 2.6 million voters who would not have participated had they lived in a spectator state (2016).

It is clearly overstating the case to call battleground states a "natural experiment," as Gerber, Huber, and Dowling do (2009). Nevertheless, there are several factors which make it reasonable to trust battleground status as a means of assessing the effects of campaign mobilization on political behavior. First, battleground states empirically receive substantially more media expenditure and candidate visits (Hill and McKee 2005; Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007) and it is the increased intensity of the campaigns which seems to matter, as the effect of battleground status on turnout is greatest where campaigning is greatest (Enos and Fowler 2016). Relatedly, the effect size of battleground status is contingent on a well-organized "modern" campaign (Enos and Fowler 2016). Together these indicate it was not the characteristic of a state being competitive per se, which is more closely related with the contexts, but rather being competitive *and* experiencing mass recruitment efforts.

Moreover, looking at the literature as a whole, the association of battleground status with turnout remains even when the election under consideration changes.[3] This indicates that the effect is independent of which states are battlegrounds; implying it is more likely a characteristic of being a battleground and not simply of the states under consideration which is resulting in the change. Indeed, battleground voters are no more likely to express an intention to vote before the campaign begins than those in spectator states (Enos and Fowler 2016). Furthermore, as Figure 1 demonstrates, 2012 battleground and spectator states are largely similar in demographic characteristics such as median income, voting age population, and racial composition.[4] However, a big caveat, also visible in Figure 1, is that these states do differ dramatically in terms competitiveness and turnout in 2008. Controlling for this will therefore be an important robustness test.

Nevertheless, even this consideration is of less concern due to the nature of this study. Unlike previous assessments of the impact of battleground states on political behavior, I can make use of panel data.[5] Thus, it need not be the case that conditions in battleground and spectator states are contextually identical before the 2012 campaign, merely that individual level political interest in these two contexts would have followed parallel trends absent the campaigns. While battleground states do see an increase in interest between the 2004 and 2008 elections, likely due to the 2008 election,[6] three measures of political interest taken from American National Election Studies (ANES) data indicate that on average 2012 battleground states and spectator states followed parallel trends from pre-election 2008 to pre-election 2012 surveys (Figure 2).

As a result of these factors, if campaign mobilization does increase political interest, then we would expect that a state's battleground status in the 2012 presidential election should reflect in a change in political interest among residents of those states.

[3]Studies evaluating the effect of battleground status on turnout during all of the following years have found a positive impact: 1948 - 1988 (Shachar and Nalebuff 1999), 1980 - 2008 (Gerber et al. 2009), 2000 (Panagopoulos 2009; Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007; Hill and McKee 2005; Lipsitz 2009), 2004 (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007; Bergan et al. 2005; Lipsitz 2009) and 2012 (Enos and Fowler 2016).

[4]The one exception being percent Hispanic, thus it is essential that models include this control.

[5]The one previous evaluation of the effect of battleground status on political interest used cross-sectional data (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007). It found a positive association between living in a battleground state and political interest, particularly among the poor in 2004 but not 2000.

[6]There is considerable overlap between 2008 battleground states and 2012 battleground states.

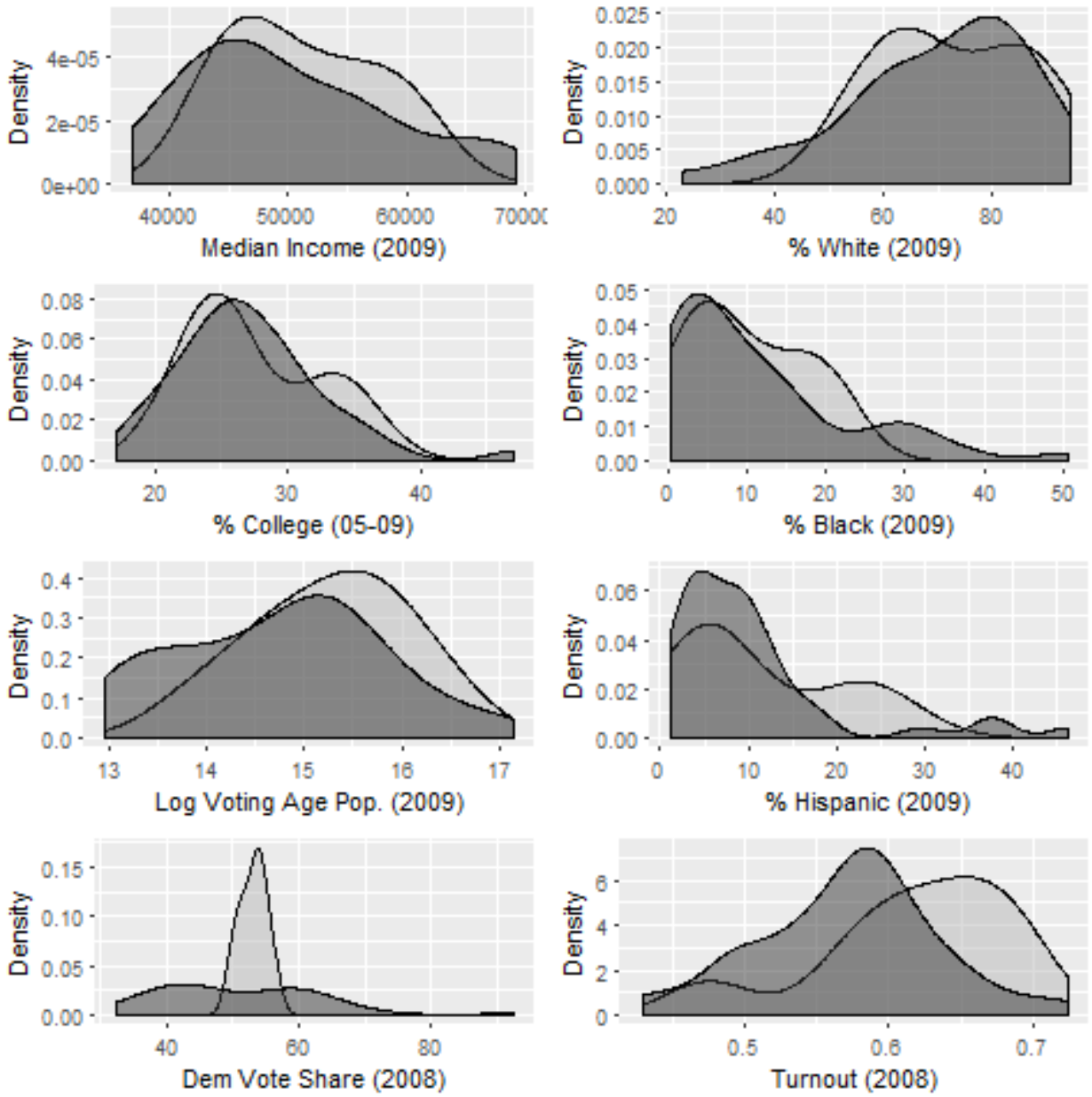

Figure 1: **Battleground States in Comparison:** Distribution of key demographics taken from the US Census in nine battleground states and forty-one spectator states. Battleground states are represented in light gray and spectator states are represented in dark gray.

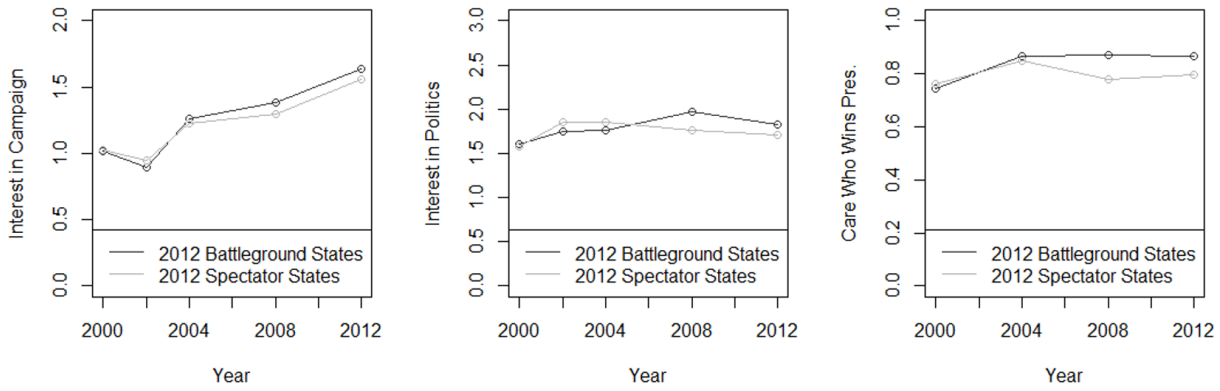

Figure 2: **Parallel Interest:** Trends in average political interest in the nine battleground and forty-one spectator states of the 2012 presidential election. Data is taken from the ANES time series studies and reflects *pre-election* interest levels. All variables are recoded to run from zero to their maximum with greater magnitude indicating greater average interest. Panel 1 is average interest in the presidential campaign, panel 2 is average general interest in politics, and panel 3 is percent of respondents who care about the outcome of the presidential election. Battleground states are represented in black and spectator states in gray.

4. Data and Method

To evaluate the effect of battleground campaigns on political interest I use data sets produced by the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and the American National Election Studies (ANES). The CCES is a three-wave panel conducted in 2010, 2012, and 2014; measuring impact in all three periods.[7] This dataset includes 9500 individuals and is designed to be representative of the US electorate when properly weighted.[8] The panel nature of the data allow me to model the effect of battleground status on individual level *change* in political interest. By doing so I control for time-invariant confounders, which is particularly valuable

[7]The question measuring political interest is: "Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs…" And allows for four answers ranging from "Hardly at all" to "Most of the time." This is very similar to the measure used by Brady et al. which demonstrated the significant role of political interest in predicting political behavior (1995). Descriptive statistics for this variable are included in the supplementary materials. Political interest and controls are measured at the individual level, however, treatment is at the state level. A simple binary indicator of 2012 battleground status is taken from Enos and Fowler (2016). They identified battleground states[^6] as those that "received the vast majority of media attention, television ads, and campaign field offices" and were "the states identified by news organizations and political consultants as the key swing states" (2016, 4). To further demonstrate that it is mobilization from the campaigns causing the shift in interest, I use a county-level measure of the number of field offices per person, taken from a dataset produced by Darr and Levendusky (2014). The county-level analysis further includes US Census data for controls.

[8]All models use the CCES provided weights.

given that political interest is thought to be largely dispositional (Prior 2018). Moreover, due to the comprehensive nature of the CCES panel, several robustness tests are possible. The cross-sectional ANES data is then used to evaluate the durability of the effect of the 2012 presidential election on interest in 2016.

Political interest and controls are measured at the individual level, however, treatment is at the state level. A simple binary indicator of 2012 battleground status is taken from Enos and Fowler (2016). They identified battleground states[9] as those that "received the vast majority of media attention, television ads, and campaign field offices" and were "the states identified by news organizations and political consultants as the key swing states" (2016, 4). To further demonstrate that it is mobilization from the campaigns causing the shift in interest, I use a county-level measure of the number of field offices per person, taken from a dataset produced by Darr and Levendusky (2014). The county-level analysis further includes US Census data for county level controls.[10]

Finally, both Enos and Fowler (2016) and Darr and Levendusky (2014) provide a breakdown of campaign activity by candidate. Through private correspondence Enos and Fowler (2016) acquired the Obama campaigns prioritization of each state and the Romney campaigns extend of voter mobilization efforts. Darr and Levendusky (2014) further disentangle the number of offices of each campaign in each county. This allows for the evaluation of the differential impact of the two campaigns.

5. Analysis

5.1 Battleground Status and Change in Interest

A simple bi-variate regression of change in interest[11] on 2012 battleground status (Column 1 of Table 1) reveals that living in a battleground state increased political interest

[9] Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Alternative specifications of battleground status are also tested, resulting in similar point estimates, available in the supplementary materials.

[10] For battleground analysis, all models use cluster-robust standard errors at the state level. The country level analysis similarly clusters standard errors at the county level.

[11] Interest in 2014 minus interest in 2010.

by 0.064 points.[12] Including individual pre-treatment (2010) controls[13] for a standard set of demographics[14] (Column 2 of Table 1) produces nearly an identical coefficient, though slightly more precisely estimated.[15] Moreover, including controls for 2008 presidential election results (turnout, democratic vote share, and democratic vote share squared), only increases the size of the effect without impacting the significance.[16]

To put the magnitude of this estimated effect into context, this is the equivalent of 1 out of every 47 people going from the minimum of following politics "hardly at all" to the maximum of caring about it "most of the time." In the context of the American electorate, this is the same as 150,000 eligible voters in North Carolina who "hardly" care starting to follow politics "most of the time" - who wouldn't have had they lived across the border in Georgia. For reference, North Carolina was won in 2012 by 92,000 votes.

Including a control for political interest in 2010 to allow for a ceiling effect only mildly reduces the point estimate (Column 3, Table 1). There also does not appear to be a strong association between pre-treatment interest level and effect size, given the insignificance of the interaction term in Column 4, however, the direction of the effect is what would be anticipated were there a ceiling effect: the higher one's pre-treatment interest, the less the campaign can increase one's interest.

Bars 1 and 2 of Figure 3 show a comparison of the bi-variate association of 2012 battleground status on political interest in 2010 (a placebo) and 2014 respectively. As theory predicts, living in a battleground in 2012 has no relationship with interest in 2010 but a strong

[12] This model is a first differences model which is equivalent to a unit-fixed effects model.

[13] In a first-differences model, the stable effect of time-invariant confounders drops from the model. However, the time-variant effects remain. For example, if the effect of being a born-again Christian on interest in politics changed between 2014 and 2010, this change in the effect would be captured be the inclusion of controls in the first-differences model.

[14] The individual level controls are income, education, gender, party id, age, race, Hispanic, born-again Christian, marital status, immigration status, and union membership. Descriptive statistics for these variables are available in the supplementary materials. Removing one control at a time to test the robustness of this association to control selection reveals that it is statistically significant at the p = .05 level in all cases except for the exclusion of party ID and Hispanic, in which cases the effect is just shy of significance: 0.061 and 0.056 respectively. A figure demonstrating this is included in the supplementary materials. Further, there are strong reasons for including both party ID and Hispanic as control variables. Race is associated with voting behavior and the two treatment conditions exhibited different distributions of Hispanic populations (Figure 1). There is also reason to believe that the Obama campaign had a more substantial effect (discussed below), justifying the inclusion of party ID.

[15] All models referred to in this paper are available in the supplementary materials in their entirety, including point estimates of controls. All standard errors are clustered at the state level unless otherwise specified.

[16] Full regression tables available in the supplementary materials.

Table 1: Primary Analysis: Association between battleground status and change in political interest; with and without standard individual controls; with and without controlling for pre-treatment interest in politics.

	Dependent variable:			
	Change in Political Interest Between 2010 and 2014			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Battleground 2012	0.064** (0.031)	0.065** (0.029)	0.058** (0.028)	0.148 (0.131)
Interest 2010			−0.306*** (0.022)	−0.297*** (0.026)
Battleground:Interest 2010				−0.037 (0.046)
Constant	−0.044** (0.019)	0.247 (0.199)	0.623*** (0.158)	0.605*** (0.164)
DF	9428	7385	7384	7383
Demographic Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
All standard errors are clustered at the state level
Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative

relationship in 2014.[17] Bar 3 of this figure shows the bi-variate association of interest in 2014 with pre-treatment education level[18]. Education is one of the best-established correlates of interest (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995), nevertheless living in a battleground state is estimated to have had an equivalent association with interest in 2014 as acquiring an additional diploma or degree.[19]

5.2 Heterogenous Treatment Effects

While the effect is substantial when estimated for the general population, it is expected that those who are less likely to be regularly exposed to politics in their daily lives are more likely to be affected. To identify the heterogeneous effect, I implement an "honest tree" (Athey and Imbens 2015), a machine learning technique which allows for the identification and estimation of heterogeneous treatment effects.[20] It is honest in that "one sample [of the dataset] is used to construct the partition and another to estimate treatment effects for each

[17] Given the overlap between states which were battlegrounds in 2008 and 2012, this is actually not necessarily what would be expected - as 2008 mobilization should have carried over into 2012 interest. However, a peculiarity of the 2010-14 CCES panel is that part of its sample selection frame is matching to a set of "known" demographics of the population. One of these variables is political interest, measured in 2007. As a result, *the CCES effectively erases the effect of the 2008 election on political interest in the process of selecting its sample population.*

[18] The education levels are: (1) no high school, (2) high school graduate, (3) some college, (4), 2-year college, (5) 4-year college, and (6) post-grad.

[19] The association of education with 2014 interest rather than change in interest is adopted as there was not sufficient variation in education levels between 2010 and 2014 to estimate the effect of change in education on change in interest.

[20] I adopt a minimum sub-population size of 200 out of 9500 and 20-fold cross validation for this analysis.

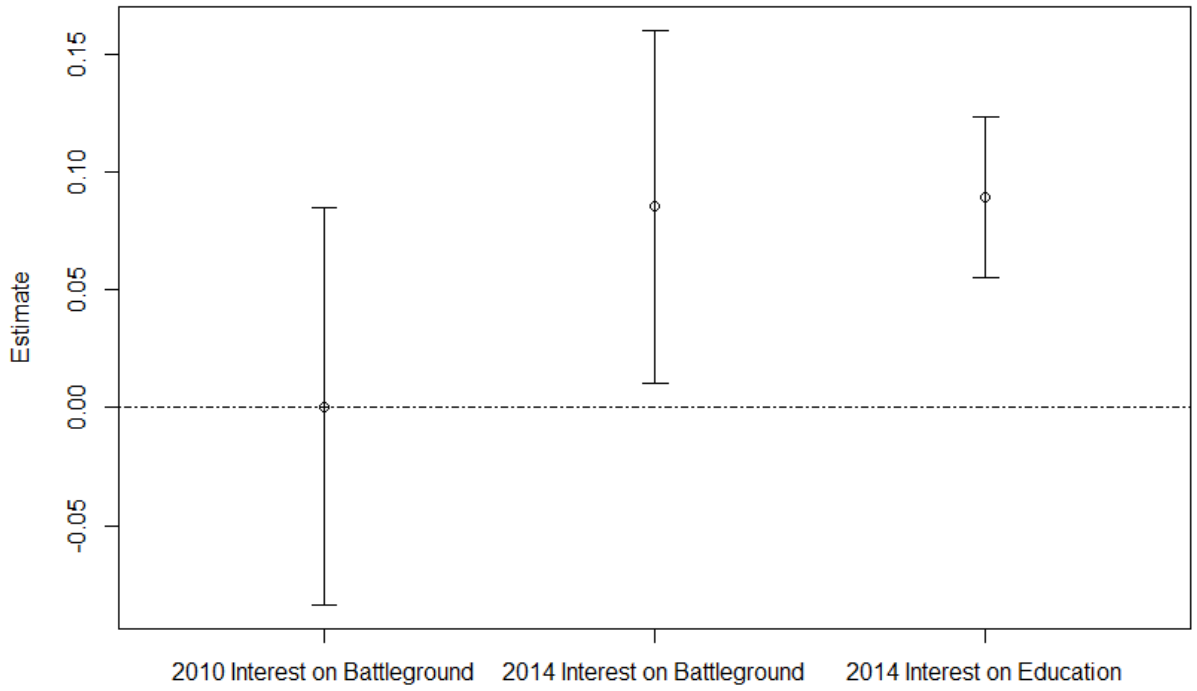

Figure 3: **Mobilization Effect Size in Comparison:** Estimated association of 2012 battleground status with political interest in 2010 and 2014; estimated association of 2010 education with political interest in 2014. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Battleground status is binary. Political interest ranges from 1 to 4, with 4 indicating greater interest. Education ranges from 1 to 6, 1 indicating no high school and 6 indicating a post-graduate degree.

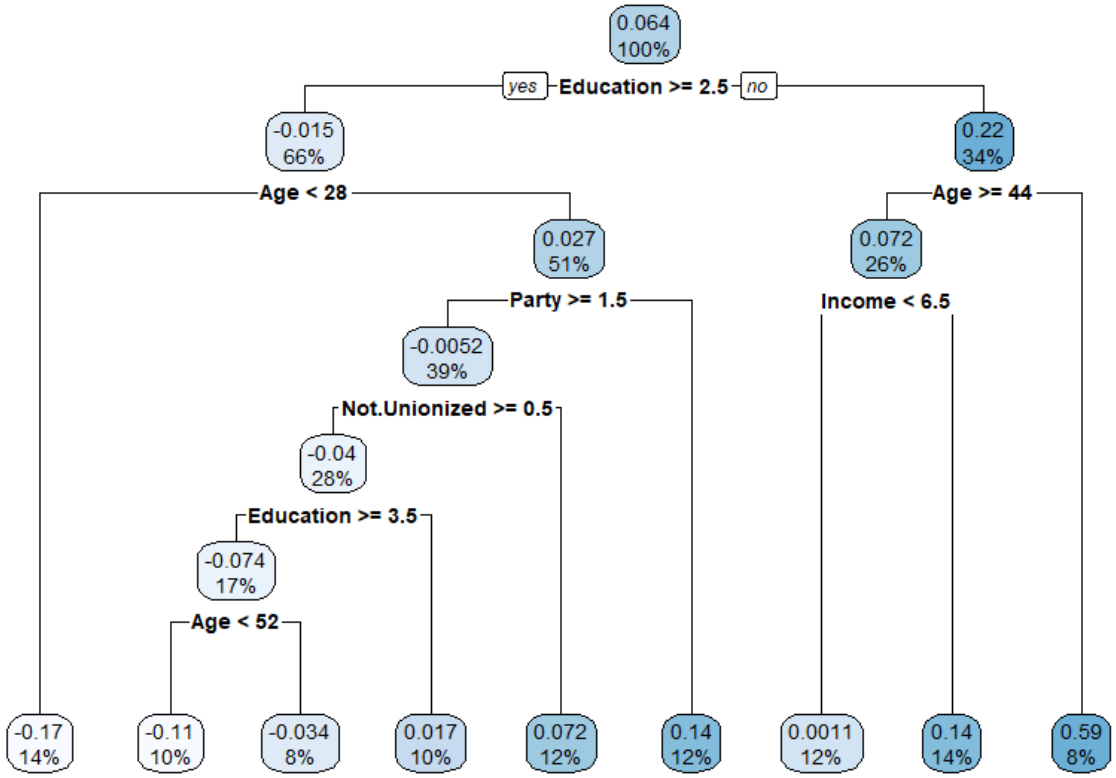

Figure 4: **Heterogenous Treatment Effects:** A causal tree estimating heterogeneous treatment effects of 2012 battleground status on change in political interest (2010-2014). All covariates are pre-treatment (2010). "Education" ranges from 1 to 6, age from 18 to 91, "Income" from 1 to 14, "Party" from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican), and "Not.Unionized" is a binary variable indicating that the respondent has never been a member of a union. Each oval contains the size of the effect for the indicated subgroup and the percent of the (weighted) population in that subgroup. All individual-level demographic covariates were included in the identification of appropriate segmentation of the population.

sub-population" (Athey and Imbens 2015, 1), thus avoiding the traditional "data mining" concerns when using data-driven approaches to identifying heterogeneous treatment effects.

As Figure 4 demonstrates, the effect is exclusively experienced by the 34% of the (weighted) sample without any college education. For this group, the effect size is *three and a half times* greater than the aforementioned effect for the general population; while those with at least some college appear to be entirely uninfluenced by the campaign. This follows logically from Prior's model in which those with abundant exposure to politics (due to education) develop a reliable disinterest, while those who are less likely to be regularly encounter politics are more susceptible to being influenced by any single interaction. Campaign mobilization appears to be

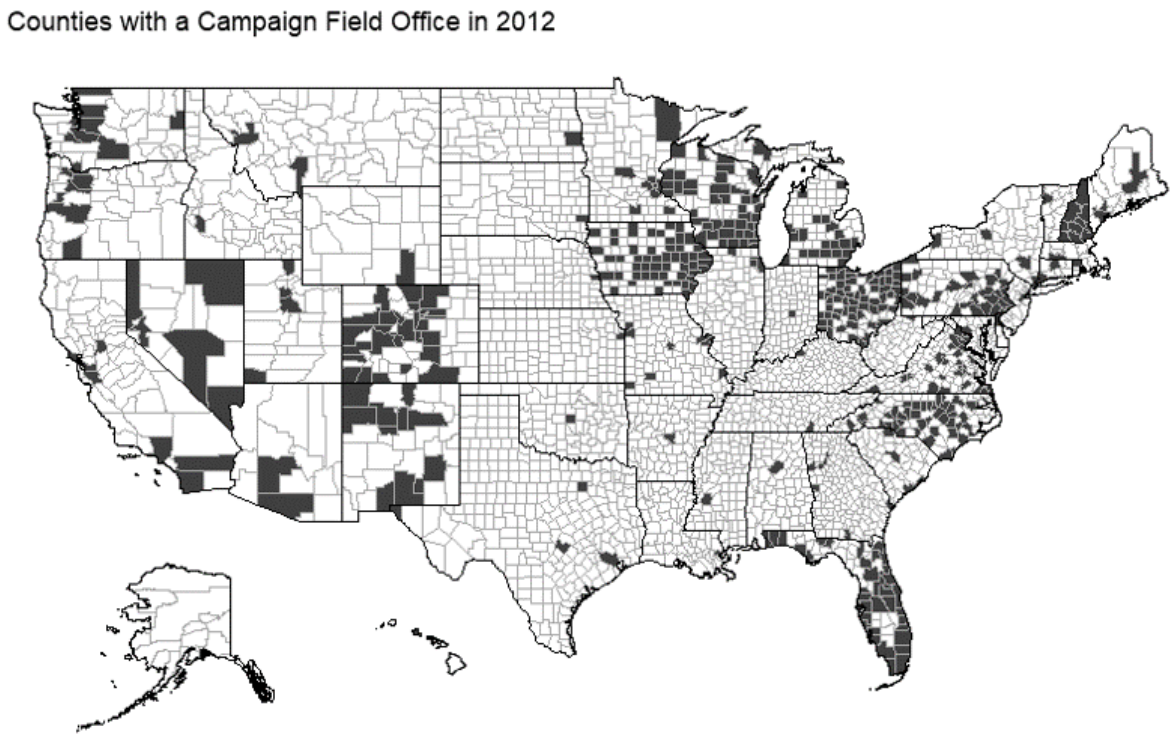

Figure 5: **Distribution of 2012 Campaign Field Offices:** US counties with at least one field office of either the Democratic or Republican presidential campaign in the lead up to the 2012 election. Counties with a field office are in black, counties without one are in white.

able to compensate for demographic characteristics which would otherwise cause one to be more likely to disengage.

5.3 The Importance of the Ground Game

A further consideration is whether it was the infiltrative campaign ground game which produced the observed association or merely a sense that "my vote matters" in battleground states. Importantly, local engagement, such as door-to-door canvassing, is more difficult to tune-out than general political media. One way to get at this question is to see if there is variation based on the presence of a formal campaign office. "Field offices are the point of contact between a campaign and volunteers, serving as a facilitator for voter contact within that campaign" (Darr and Levendusky 2014, 530). I therefore use data on the number of field

offices per 100,000 people at the county level. As visible in Figure 5, while field offices are more common in battleground states, there is notable variation within states.[21] This method is further a means of corroborating the effect established in the previous section, as an unobserved confounder would have to predict battleground status, change in political interest, *and* the number of field offices per person. This is particularly unlikely as the simple correlation between 2010 interest and field offices per capita is a paltry 0.02.

Table 2: Field Offices and Interest: Association of field offices per 100,000 in a county with change in political interest, including individual level controls; with and without 2012 batteground status; with and without county level controls.

	Dependent variable:			
	Change in Political Interest Between 2010 and 2014			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2012 Field Offices	0.056*** (0.021)	0.056** (0.027)	0.062** (0.028)	0.070** (0.032)
2012 Battleground		−0.001 (0.058)		0.001 (0.062)
Constant	0.563 (0.359)	0.563 (0.360)	0.992** (0.415)	0.803 (0.534)
DF	7369	7368	1815	6096
Individual Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County Controls	No	No	No	Yes
Sample	Full	Full	Battleground Only	Full
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
				All standard errors are clustered at the county level
				Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative

As can be seen in Column 2 of Table 2, the inclusion of field offices per 100,000 people completely absorbs the effect of living in a battleground state: every 1 field office per 100,000 persons is associated with a statistically significant increase of 0.056 points in political interest, while the main effect becomes indistinguishable from 0. Moreover, as visible in Column 3, if the sample is limited to only battleground states, the estimated effect of field office is unadulterated. Finally, when a set of county-level controls, which include 2008 voter turnout and 2008 democratic vote share,[22] are included in the model (Column 4), the association merely becomes stronger. This further adds credibility to the finding that it was 2012 mobilization that increased political interest.

[21] The figure reflects a binary coding for clarity (office or no office), however, the analysis uses number of field offices per person.

[22] County-level measures include: median income in 2009, poverty rates in 2009, the log of total population in 2010, log of voting age population in 2010, Democratic vote share in 2008, electoral turnout in 2008, unemployment in 2010, percent white in 2010, percent black in 2010, and percent Hispanic in 2010. These controls are taken from US Census data.

An additional means of testing the importance of the in-person campaign is to evaluate the differential impact of the Obama and Romney mobilization efforts on interest. "The Obama campaign in particular made an unprecedented investment in voter outreach and mobilization" (Darr and Levendusky 2014, 530) and was well known for its "philosophical belief in the power of organizing at the local level" (McKenna and Han 2014, ix-x). As a result, we would expect for the Obama campaign to have significantly more impact on political interest than the Romney campaign. Empirically, this is what we find. As can be seen in Table 3, Obama field office placement predicts change in interest in politics better than general office placement, while Romney field offices does not have any statistically significant association with change in interest. Similarly, if as state is considered a priority Obama campaign, its residents experienced a sizable statistically significant increase in political interest. Romney prioritization had no such effect.[23]

Table 3: Party Field Offices and Change in Interest: Association of field offices per 100,000 in a county for each party with change in political interest, with and without controls.

	Dependent variable:			
	Change in Political Interest Between 2010 and 2014			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2012 Obama Offices	0.069*** (0.025)		0.098*** (0.036)	
2012 Romney Offices		0.079 (0.053)		−0.004 (0.070)
2012 Battleground			0.0004 (0.055)	0.082 (0.058)
Constant	−0.050** (0.021)	−0.040* (0.021)	0.787 (0.533)	0.729 (0.530)
DF	9411	9411	6095	6095
Individual Controls	No	No	Yes	Yes
County Controls	No	No	Yes	Yes

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
All standard errors are clustered at the county level
Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative

5.4 Alternative Mechanisms

Epiphenomenal Interest: One concern is that measures of political interest might not be capturing the intended concept of "interest in politics." Instead, people may be reflecting back on their engagement in politics and summarizing this political behavior in their evaluation of their interest in politics. In other words, an individual might think: "I voted, so I must have an

[23]This is visible in Table 18 of the supplementary materials.

interest in politics, as that is what people interested in politics do." This is of particular concern due to the well-documented finding that having voted once increases one's propensity to vote again in the future due to "habit" (Brody and Sniderman 1977; Green and Shachar 2000; Kadt 2017). However, one can ameliorate this concern by controlling for actual political participation.

The CCES matches people to their voting records, making it possible to control for whether they actually voted. It further includes self-reported measures of political activity: attending meetings, putting up lawn signs/bumper stickers, working for a campaign, and donating money. Finally, it includes voter registration status. I ran six regressions of battleground status on change in interest, including controls,[24] adding alternately measures of: (1) voting in 2012, (2) voting in 2014, (3) voting and all measures of self-reported participation in 2012, (4) voting and self-reported participation in 2014, (5) registering to vote between 2010 and 2014, and (6) all available participation variables in 2012 and 2014. In these models, the coefficient on 2012 battleground status range from 0.062 to 0.070 and is always significant at conventional levels. Thus, it is unlikely that this observed association is the result of "epiphenomenal interest".

Social Desirability Bias: There is a known *social desirability bias* with questions of political interest: few people "are willing to confess a very low level of interest for arts, science, and politics. These are 'worthy' domains that the 'good' citizen should say she has at least a modest degree of interest in" (Blais, Galais, and Bowler 2014, 9). It is possible that mobilization makes the social desirability of political interest even greater. Thus, measured changes in political interest may reflect only a change in beliefs about social expectations. To evaluate this, I adopt two strategies. First, as mentioned above, the CCES includes administrative data on whether or not someone voted. It further includes *self-reported data* on whether or not someone voted. This allows for the construction of a measure of over-reporting, which can be thought of as a measure of susceptibility to social desirability.

Given the panel has three waves during which individuals were asked if they voted, and for which we have matched voting records, it is possible to create several configurations of over-reporting: (1) *Current Over-Reporter*: The individual over-reported in 2014, regardless of whether they over-reported previously. (2) *New Over-Reporter*: The individual did not

[24] Regression tables available in the supplementary materials.

over-report in 2010 but did over-report in 2014. (3) *Ever Over-Reporter*: the individual over-reported at least once during the three waves of the panel. (4) *Always Over-Reporter*: the individual over-reported in all three waves. Controlling for each of these measures individually and in concert has little effect on the point estimate of the coefficient on battleground status (including controls). The point estimate ranges from 0.060 and 0.066 and is significant at conventional levels in all cases.[25]

A second, and even more compelling test, is whether battleground status influences political knowledge. The CCES includes six "tests" of political knowledge: Whether or not the respondent can correctly identify the party of their governor, their congressman, and each of their senators, as well as if they can identify which party controls the Senate and the House. These binary variables are aggregated to create a "political knowledge" index. Because political knowledge is an elective affinity of political interest but is more difficult to fake, a "true change" in political interest would reflect in a change in knowledge.

The first two bars of Figure 6 show the point estimate for the association of 2012 battleground status with change in the index of political knowledge between 2010 and 2012 (including individual level controls), with and without standard errors clustered at the state level. As expected, the estimate is positive. Unfortunately, standard errors increase substantially when clustered at the state level (Bar 2, Figure 6). This is to be expected given the nature of the questions: it is much easier in Texas to know that the governor is a Republican (given it has been a Republican since 1995) than in New Jersey or Arkansas where the governor's mansion has switched parties in recent memory.

Fortunately, as demonstrated above, the number of field offices per person at the county level is a near perfect measure of the aspect of 2012 battleground mobilization which actually influenced interest. Regressing political knowledge on this measure again produces a statistically significant positive coefficient. Given treatment is correlated at the county level but the outcome is correlated at the state level, the appropriate model clusters standard errors at the county level while using 2010 and 2014 state fixed-effects. This model produces a statistically significant positive estimate. Thus, it appears that the 2012 presidential campaign mobilization did increase political knowledge. This adds confidence that the effect of the campaign on interest is not

[25] Regression tables available in the supplementary materials.

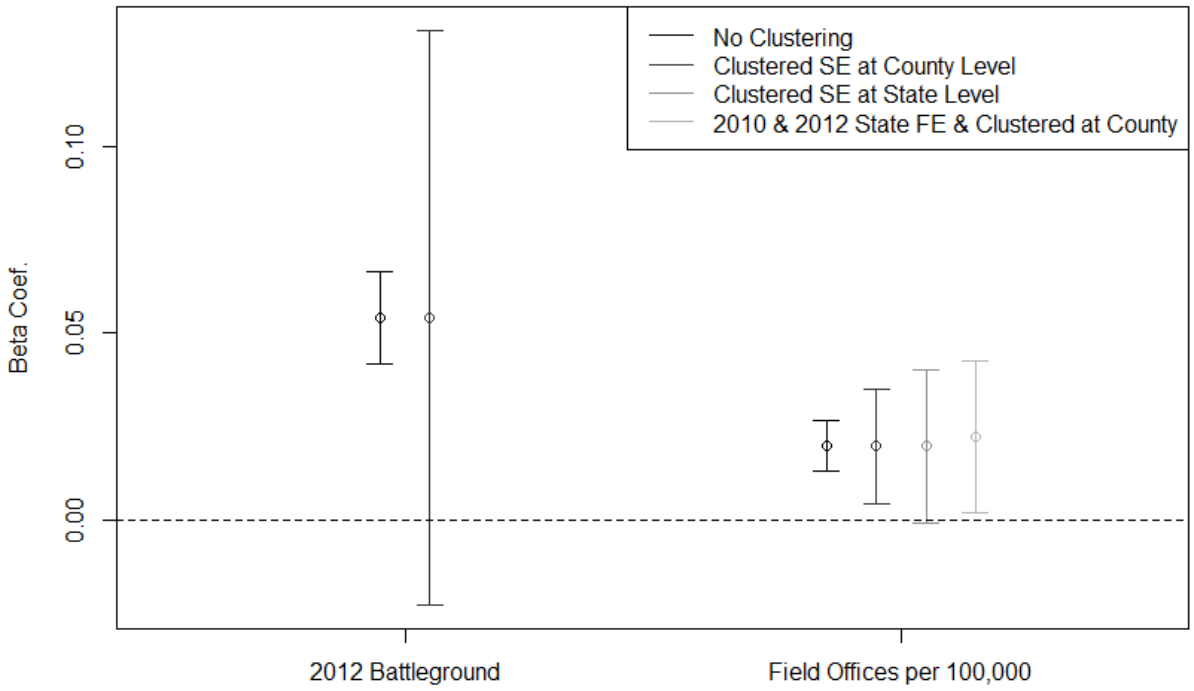

Figure 6: **Impact of Mobilization on Political Knowledge:** Estimated association of 2012 battleground status and change in political knowledge; estimated association of field offices and political knowledge. Change in political knowledge is the difference in the number of correct answers to six questions about party control of political offices between 2010 and 2014. All models include standard individual demographic controls. Confidence intervals are at 95% level.

merely a reflection of change in social desirability bias but was rather a genuine difference in psychological engagement with politics.

Constant Cause: A competitive election might result in changes in party infrastructure which continues to engage citizens' interest in politics. Thus, what looks like a dispositional change in interest is in fact a situational change in the "constant cause" of party infrastructure. This is unlikely, however, since adding a control for whether an individual was contacted in any way or in person by a campaign in 2014 produces no notable change in the point estimated impact of battleground election or its significance. Similarly, controls for change in the level of contact between 2010 and 2014 has no impact.[26]

Yet, it may not be campaign infrastructure but the general "ethos" of a community which changes as a result of a competitive election. To tackle this question I evaluate the effect of moving states between the 2012 and 2014. Column 1 of Table 4, shows that moving does have a dramatically negative effect on one's interest, however, the effect of having lived in battleground state in 2012 does not notable change. Moreover, when these two variables are interacted, the interaction term is far from significant (Column 2).

The lack of significance of the interaction term may be due to the small number of cases of moving: only 2.8% of the sample moved states between 2012 and 2014 and only 0.6% moved out of a battleground state (267 people total). The fact that this sample provided enough power to estimate a statistically significant association between moving and change in interest does partially ameliorate this concern. Nevertheless, to increase the sample of people who moved, I consider all those who changed counties between 2012 and 2014, of which there are 487 cases. Given, that we know that the effect of the campaign was localized to the county-level (see above) and that "moving" is meant to capture the effect of leaving one's politicized network, this is a useful test. Again, the interaction term is not statistically significant while battleground state is (Column 4 of Table 4).

In combination with the fact that campaign contacts did not influence the battleground effect, this provides strong support for the idea that it is actually dispositional interest in politics which is changing.

[26] Regression tables available in the supplementary materials.

Table 4: Moving, Mobilization, and Interest: Association between 2012 battleground status and change in political interest controlling for moving states or counties; with and without interactive effects.

	Dependent variable:			
	Change in Political Interest Between 2010 and 2014			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2012 Battleground	0.068** (0.030)	0.072** (0.032)	0.069** (0.029)	0.055** (0.027)
Moved States	−0.184* (0.094)	−0.160 (0.130)		
Moved Counties			−0.127 (0.083)	−0.177* (0.095)
Battleground:Moved State		−0.077 (0.150)		
Battleground:Moved County				0.156 (0.177)
Constant	0.248 (0.200)	0.247 (0.200)	0.253 (0.201)	0.254 (0.202)
DF	7384	7383	7384	7383
Cases of Moved	267	267	487	487
Individual Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
All standard errors are clustered at the state level
Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative

5.5 Relevance & Durability

So far, I have provided evidence that 2014 political interest increased as a result of campaign mobilization in 2012. However, the importance of this effect is linked to whether this, in turn, manifests itself in changes in behavior. To test this, I evaluate whether a change in interest is associated with a change in voting behavior. I create a binary "New Voter" variable which takes on a 1 if the individual voted in 2014 but not in 2010. Regressing this variable on the change in interest and demographic controls indicates that a one-point increase in political interest is associated with a statistically significant 4.6% increase in the probability of being a new voter in 2014.[27] Remarkably, this association is even stronger (7.1%, p = 0.004) when I subset to only those *who did not actually vote in 2012,* again indicating that the relationship is not merely due to "habit".

Having shown the effect to be sizable in 2014, we might finally ask if it endures more than two years. Unfortunately, the CCES panel data only covers two years after the 2012 campaign. Therefore, to evaluate whether the association lasts, I turn to the ANES 2016 time series survey. One of the benefits of the ANES is that it includes several measures of political interest. This allows for aggregation, a method that has been shown to reduce measurement error with

[27] Both a logit and probit model produce statistically significant positive effects. The results of the linear model are presented due to ease of interpretation.

latent attitudinal variables such as political interest (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008). Moreover, while such aggregation was impossible in the CCES, the corroboration of the results from the aggregated ANES data with those of the CCES data indicate the above findings were unlikely to have been simply the result of measurement error.

The ANES includes six questions that reflect a "general interest" in politics, three measured before the 2016 election and three after. I combine these to create a "General Interest" measure. In addition, the ANES includes 15 variables which capture how much political media the respondent consumes. These are likewise combined to create a "Political Media Consumption" measure. Then both sets of variables are combined into a "Total Interest" measure. I use principal component analysis[28] to aggregate the data, taking this first identified component (i.e. the component which explains the plurality of the variance) to be a measure of latent interest. I then re-scale this measure to range between 0 and 1, with 1 signifying maximum possible interest.

Table 5: Durablity: Association between 2012 battleground status and 2016 political interest, controlling for 2016 battleground status.

	Dependent variable:		
	General Interest	Media Consumption	Combined
	(1)	(2)	(3)
2012 Battleground	0.021^{**} (0.009)	0.023^{**} (0.010)	0.020^{**} (0.009)
2016 Battleground (Subj.)	-0.042^{***} (0.011)	-0.020^{*} (0.011)	-0.030^{***} (0.010)
Constant	0.285^{***} (0.036)	0.296^{***} (0.033)	0.295^{***} (0.033)
DF	3323	2837	2831
Individual Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
			All standard errors are clustered at the state level
			Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative

I regress these three outcomes on 2012 battleground status, the results of which are reported in Table 5. I use an equivalent set of demographic controls to those used in the panel analysis. Furthermore, because of the close overlap between battlegrounds in 2012 and in 2016, I control for whether the respondent thought their state was a battleground in 2016.[29] 2012

[28] Principal component analysis is a method which finds the linear projection that explains the maximum variance among multiple variables.

[29] I alternatively tested media assessment of 2016 battleground states. Using media assessment rather than

battleground status has a statistically significant positive association with all three measures, indicating that the association is durable. However, the effect has somewhat attenuated. In 2014, 2012 battleground status was associated with an increase in interest of a tenth of a standard deviation, in 2016 the effect size was about half that.

6. Conclusion

I challenged a "hard" interpretation of the argument that interest is either something you have or you don't. In doing so, I may have created a straw-man, a fringe position that no political scientist wholly believes. But if that is the case, then the importance of demonstrating the faultiness of this position is even greater. Practically, if parties and activists believe only the already engaged, and perhaps children, can be pulled into politics, these political entrepreneurs will be less likely to mobilize the disinterested. In other words, they will be less likely to target those who already tend to be marginalized in society. Moreover, unchecked, believing interest immutable damages political science's ability to accurately understand and even measure the world. For example, the CCES, one of the most large-scale and comprehensive data sets on political behavior available to political science, used the distribution of political interest in 2007 to develop their sampling frame for 2016; implicitly assuming the distribution of political interest in the population had not changed over nearly a decade.

By analyzing the role of the 2012 presidential election in reshaping political interest, I show that mobilization can have an effect on this supposedly intransigent attitude. The findings demonstrate that this mobilization engaged those unlikely to have a demographic predisposition to take an interest in politics, specifically those without a college degree. The increase in interest in battleground states manufactured by campaigns was estimated to have a similar magnitude to acquiring an additional degree or diploma. Furthermore, this rise in measured interest is likely a reflection of a change in true interest, given evidence against epiphenomenality, social desirability bias, constant cause, or measurement error. Moreover, cross-sectional data from 2016 indicates that the effect has staying power.

individual assessment produced an even larger estimated association between 2012 status and 2016 interest (available in the supplemental materials); I therefore chose to report the more conservative model. Interestingly, living in a battleground in 2016 (i.e. increased exposure to the 2016 campaign) is associated with a *decline* in interest. Given that both parties' candidates were the most disliked in over 30 years, this is perhaps unsurprising.

However, the evidence presented here categorically does not show that any election, any campaign, or any mobilization can increase political engagement. Instead, it indicates that to change interest in politics necessitates thick infiltrative on-the-ground campaigns; exactly the type of campaigns that are taking place less and less in American politics (Schier 2000; Skocpol 2003; Hersh 2015). Democracy requires more than elections to produce political equality. It requires the regular engagement of its citizenry. If we wish to create a democratic society we therefore need to understand not just how to mobilize, we need to learn how to motivate.

References

Ansolabehere, Stephen, Jonathan Rodden, and James M. Snyder. 2008. "The Strength of Issues: Using Multiple Measures to Gauge Preference Stability, Ideological Constraint, and Issue Voting." *American Political Science Review* 102 (2): 215–32.

Athey, Susan, and Guido W. Imbens. 2015. "Machine Learning Methods for Estimating Heterogeneous Causal Effects." *Stat* 1050 (5).

Bergan, Daniel E., Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Costas Panagopoulos. 2005. "Grassroots Mobilization and Voter Turnout in 2004." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69 (5): 760–77. doi:10.1093/poq/nfi063.

Blais, Andre, Carolina Galais, and Shaun Bowler. 2014. "Is Political Interest Absolute or Relative?" SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 2455573. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

Brady, Henry E. 1999. "Political Participation." In *Measures of Political Attitudes*, edited by John P. Robinson, Phillip R. Shaver, and Henry E. Brady, 1st edition. San Diego: Emerald Group Pub Ltd.

Brady, Henry E., Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. "Beyond Ses: A Resource Model of Political Participation." *The American Political Science Review* 89 (2): 271–94.

Brody, Richard A., and Paul M. Sniderman. 1977. "From Life Space to Polling Place: The Relevance of Personal Concerns for Voting Behavior." *British Journal of Political Science* 7 (3): 337–60.

Campbell, Andrea Louise. 2003. *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*. Princeton University Press.

Carreras, Miguel, and Yasemin Irepoglu. 2013. "Trust in Elections, Vote Buying, and Turnout in Latin America." *Electoral Studies* 32 (4): 609–19. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2013.07.012.

Converse, Philip E. 1962. *The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics*. Survey Research Center, University of Michigan.

Darr, Joshua P., and Matthew S. Levendusky. 2014. "Relying on the Ground Game: The Placement and Effect of Campaign Field Offices." *American Politics Research* 42 (3): 529–48.

Deth, Jan W. van. 1990. "Interest in Politics." In *Continuities in Political Action: A Longitudinal Study of Political Orientations in Three Western Democracies*, edited by M. Kent Jennings and Jan W. van Deth. Berlin, Boston: De Grutyer. doi:10.1515/978110882193.

Emmenegger, Patrick, Paul Marx, and Dominik Schraff. 2016. "Off to a Bad Start: Unemployment and Political Interest During Early Adulthood." *The Journal of Politics* 79 (1): 315–28.

Enos, Ryan, and Anthony Fowler. 2016. "Aggregate Effects of Large-Scale Campaigns on Voter Turnout." *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1–19.

Enos, Ryan, Anthony Fowler, and Lynn Vavreck. 2013. "Increasing Inequality: The Effect of GOTV Mobilization on the Composition of the Electorate." *The Journal of Politics* 76 (1): 273–88.

Fiorina, Morris P. 2002. "Parties, Participation, and Representation in America: Old Theories Face New Realities." *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, 511–41.

Galston, William A. 2001. "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (1): 217–34.

Gerber, Alan S., Gregory Huber, Conor Dowling, David Doherty, and Nicole Schwartzberg. 2009.

"Using Battleground States as a Natural Experiment to Test Theories of Voting."
Gimpel, James G., Karen M. Kaufmann, and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz. 2007. "Battleground States Versus Blackout States: The Behavioral Implications of Modern Presidential Campaigns." *Journal of Politics* 69 (3): 786–97.
Glenn, Norval D., and Michael Grimes. 1968. "Aging, Voting, and Political Interest." *American Sociological Review* 33 (4): 563–75.
Goerres, Achim. 2007. "Why Are Older People More Likely to Vote? The Impact of Ageing on Electoral Turnout in Europe." *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 9 (1): 90–121.
Green, Donald P., and Ron Shachar. 2000. "Habit Formation and Political Behaviour: Evidence of Consuetude in Voter Turnout." *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (4): 561–73.
Gronke, Paul, and Peter Miller. 2012. "Voting by Mail and Turnout in Oregon: Revisiting Southwell and Burchett." *American Politics Research* 40 (6): 976–97. doi:10.1177/1532673X12457809.
Han, Hahrie. 2009. *Moved to Action: Motivation, Participation, and Inequality in American Politics*. Stanford University Press.
Hersh, Eitan. 2015. *Hacking the Electorate: How Campaigns Perceive Voters*. Cambridge University Press.
Highton, Benjamin. 2017. "Voter Identification Laws and Turnout in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (1): 149–67. doi:10.1146/annurev-polisci-051215-022822.
Hill, David, and Seth C. McKee. 2005. "The Electoral College, Mobilization, and Turnout in the 2000 Presidential Election." *American Politics Research* 33 (5): 700–725. doi:10.1177/1532673X04271902.
Kadt, Daniel de. 2017. "Voting Then, Voting Now: The Long-Term Consequences of Participation in South Africa's First Democratic Election." *The Journal of Politics* 79 (2): 670–87.
Kuenzi, Michelle, and Gina M. S. Lambright. 2011. "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries." *Party Politics* 17 (6): 767–99. doi:10.1177/1354068810376779.
Lipsitz, Keena. 2009. "The Consequences of Battleground and 'Spectator' State Residency for Political Participation." *Political Behavior* 31 (2): 187–209.
Martinez, Michael D., and David Hill. 1999. "Did Motor Voter Work?" *American Politics Quarterly* 27 (3): 296–315.
Mattila, Mikko, Hanna Wass, Peter Soderlund, Sami Fredriksson, Paivi Fadjukoff, and Katja Kokko. 2011. "Personality and Turnout: Results from the Finnish Longitudinal Studies." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 34 (4): 287–306.
McKenna, Elizabeth, and Hahrie Han. 2014. *Groundbreakers: How Obama's 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America*. Oxford University Press.
Miller, Joanna, and Kyle Saunders. 2016. "It's Not All About Resources: Explaining (or Not) the Instability of Individual-Level Political Participation over Time." *American Politics Research* 44 (6): 943–81.
Panagopoulos, Costas. 2009. "Campaign Dynamics in Battleground and Nonbattleground States." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73 (1): 119–29.
Prior, Markus. 2010. "You've Either Got It or You Don't? The Stability of Political Interest over the Life Cycle." *The Journal of Politics* 72 (3): 747–66.
———. 2018. *Hooked: How Politics Captures People's Interest*. Cambridge University Press.
Sapiro, Virginia. 2004. "Not Your Parents' Political Socialization: Introduction for a New

Generation." *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 7: 1–23.
Schier, Steven. 2000. *By Invitation Only*. 1 edition. Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press.
Shachar, Ron, and Barry Nalebuff. 1999. "Follow the Leader: Theory and Evidence on Political Participation." *American Economic Review*, 525–47.
Shehata, Adam, and Erik Amna. 2017. "The Development of Political Interest Among Adolescents: A Communication Mediation Approach Using Five Waves of Panel Data." *Communication Research*, June, 0093650217714360.
Skocpol, Theda. 2003. *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. The Julian J. Rothbaum Distinguished Lecture Series, v. 8. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
Soderlund, Peter, Hanna Wass, and Andre Blais. 2011. "The Impact of Motivational and Contextual Factors on Turnout in First- and Second-Order Elections." *Electoral Studies* 30 (4): 689–99.