Awakened: How Campaign Mobilization Reshapes Political Engagement

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Interest in politics is consistently shown to be a substantively important precursor to political participation. Unfortunately, sources of its variation remain under-explored. This is likely due to a widespread belief that interest is intractable: 'You've either got it or you don't.' Even elections, festivals of democracy, are believed to not impact interest. However, by estimating the effect of 2012 presidential battleground campaigns on change in political interest, I show that through exposing the disengaged to unavoidable political stimuli, political campaigns do augment interest. This effect is estimated to be equivalent to 150,000 entirely disinterested North Carolinians becoming fully engaged, who would have remained apathetic had they lived in neighboring Georgia. Moreover, the change is concentrated among those without college degrees, indicating campaign organizing may compensate for marginalizing conditions. Ultimately, by demonstrating how mobilization can produce motivation, these findings underscore the importance of focusing on political recruitment in expanding the electorate.

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

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1. Introduction: Instigating Interest

If not voting were a vote for "Nobody," Nobody would have won every presidential election since 1912. The great struggle in a democracy is not between Left and Right, but between engagement and apathy. *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.[3] 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). For a representative government to function accountably requires that politics motivate citizens to participate. Yet, our understanding of how political interest changes remains underdeveloped, a fact which scholars have noted periodically for the past two decades (Prior 2018; 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). And elections are thought to be ineffective engines of motivation (Prior 2018), because campaigns target the already 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 suggest a re-examination of the important proposition that political mobilization can change an individual's interest in politics. I argue that campaign mobilization, *when sufficiently infiltrative,* can indeed develop dispositional political interest, especially among the structurally disengaged. To demonstrate this, I

[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] In Brady et al.'s analysis, 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.

[3] E.g. in Europe (Soderlund, Wass, and Blais 2011), Latin America (Carreras and Irepoglu 2013), and Africa (Kuenzi and Lambright 2011)

examine 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 substantial increase in reported political interest between 2010 and 2014. This effect is estimated to be equivalent to 150,000 entirely disinterested North Carolinians becoming fully engaged, who would have remained apathetic had they lived in neighboring Georgia.

But I further narrow this examination to the "ground game." Using data on campaign field office placement (Darr and Levendusky 2014), I show that this effect is driven by the on-the-ground campaign mobilization. The importance of this infiltrative campaign mobilization is further demonstrated by the differential impact of the Obama and Romney campaigns. The Obama campaign was well-known for drawing on his background as a community organizer and relying heavily on the thick organizing strategies these local activists use to build power among the marginalized (McKenna and Han 2014). Romney's campaign was not informed by these practices. As a result, both in terms of the impact of these campaign's relative state prioritization and the actual number of field offices they placed in each county per capita, I find that being targeted by the Obama campaign is associated with increased interest in politics while the Romney campaign's efforts had no such effect. Altogether, this indicates that to augment psychological engagement in politics, campaigns must be sufficiently "infiltrative" so as to create, what Prior terms, "inadvertent political encounters" (2018).

The motivation that these types of campaigns can create is both sizable and important. I estimate that living in a battleground state in 2012 had an equivalent impact on subsequent political interest as acquiring an additional diploma or degree.

This result is particularly notable as the observed association is concentrated among the less educated, suggesting mobilization may compensate for this disadvantageous socio-economic condition. However, it is also worrying, as the less educated tend to be relatively ignored by political campaigns (Hersh 2015). The repercussions of this augmented interest are tangible, affecting both voting behavior and political knowledge in 2014. Furthermore, the change appears to be durable: 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) data indicates that the effect of battleground status on interest remained into the subsequent election cycle.

Given the well-documented importance of political interest for political behavior, identifying the factors that may augment individual interest is essential to the formation of a more democratic society and our understanding of the electorate. This is despite, or rather because of, the fact that interest is generally stable. I demonstrate that political campaigns, especially infiltrative campaigns such as those embarked on by former President Obama, are one such factor. In doing so, this paper motivates greater research into understanding how dispositional political interest may be created and the role of mobilizing institutions in this process. And practically, these findings suggest that who political entrepreneurs choose to recruit can durably change who is motivated to engage in politics.

2. How to Motivate the Disengaged

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 affects 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 actually have 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 (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 in politics 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 (Miller and Saunders 2016). Overall, if political interest is highly consistent, the identification of factors that are manipulable by deliberate action — rather than merely by broad structural conditions — provides us with practical information about how to increase democratic participation.

Are political campaigns one such factor? And does the kind of campaign matter?

Panel data from the US and Germany indicates that, in general, interest in politics does not seem to fluctuate around elections (Prior 2018). In Prior's analysis, this is because "People become involved in politics because they want politics, not because politics wants them" (2018, 4). Disinterest is self-reinforcing, as the disinterested simply "tune out" politics, never re-evaluating their disengagement. Ultimately, ignoring elections is quite easy most of the time, especially given most campaigns purposefully avoid the disengaged (Hersh 2015). However, using a Bayesian logic, Prior proposes that while for some lack of interests is a well-grounded established disposition, for others it is an "inkling" that is more never-tested than deeply-held (2018).

Building on Prior's logic, we can distinguish two types of people who report being disinterested in politics. For the first group, the "consciously disengaged," their lack of interest is an active decision. They have been regularly confronted by politics in their lives, due to education, as well as their social and professional experiences. They know the players and the rules of the game. They have been told it is a duty and understand that politics can influence their lives. They can find their polling place and tell you what channel CNN is on. They know all that and then decide politics is not for them. For these people, their low levels of interest are reliable and unlikely to be affected by mobilization. Handing them a leaflet, pounding on their door, giving them an impassioned speech about civic duty, or connecting things they care about to politics, none of that is going to change their mind. They are resolute.

But many people may instead be just "passively disengaged." Due to their circumstances, these individuals lack the situational exposures to politics to cultivate an interest and, as a result, simply default to avoidance due to a "hunch" that they dislike it. They never learned about the electoral college or federalism in school, and it all felt too complicated and distant. They tune out the news because it is hard to see how it matters to their lives. They never registered to vote and cannot be bothered to find out how. It

is not that they have decided politics is unimportant or uninteresting, so much as they have decided it is not worth checking. While these people are potentially open to change, doing so would require getting relevant information in front of them, and that is really hard. This audience does not come to rallies, they are not on mailing lists, and they do not watch CNN.

Getting your message in front of these people requires creating "infiltrative" experiences. It is not surprising, therefore, that most elections do not affect interest - as most elections are easy to tune out. But, when campaigns do create these unavoidable interactions and reach people with less lifetime political exposure, then I propose they can influence these people's interest in politics. In other words, while elections per se do not matter to changing political interest, infiltrative campaign mobilization does.

3. Unavoidable: The 2012 Battleground Campaign

The 2012 presidential battleground campaign is a prime case of an infiltrative campaign mobilization. Presidential elections are massive recruitment shocks, fueled by billions of dollars, actively 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 substantial 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 perhaps overstating the case to call battleground status a "natural

experiment," as Gerber, Huber, and Dowling do (2009). Nevertheless, several factors make it reasonable to have confidence in the use of 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 appear to be the actual 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 two facts indicate it was not the characteristic of a state being competitive per se, which is more closely related to the contexts of these states and thus risk confounding, but rather the massive recruitment efforts, which is more plausibly exogenous.

Moreover, looking at the literature as a whole, the association of battleground status with turnout remains even when the election under consideration changes.[4] This indicates that the effect is independent of which states are battlegrounds; implying it is more likely a characteristic of being a battleground, and again not the contexts of the states, 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, the 2012 battleground and spectator states are largely similar in demographic characteristics such as median income, voting-age population, and racial composition.[5]

Most importantly, unlike previous assessments of the impact of battleground states

[4]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).

[5]These states do differ dramatically in terms of competitiveness and turnout in 2008, making controlling for these factors an important robustness test. The distributions of these state-level characteristics are available in the online appendix Figure A1.

on political behavior, I make use of panel data to assess *change* at the individual level.[6] As discussed in the following section, this means that it need not be the case that conditions in battleground and spectator states are contextually identical before the 2012 campaign, as all *time-invariant* state and individual level confounders are controlled for. Therefore, given the nature of the treatment assignment and the structure of the data, it becomes possible to confidently estimate the effect of 2012 campaign mobilization on interest in politics.

4. Data and Approach

To measure political interest, I use data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and the American National Election Studies (ANES). The CCES conducted a three-wave panel in 2010, 2012, and 2014 (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2015).[7] This data set includes 9500 individuals and is designed to be representative of the US electorate when properly weighted.[8] The panel nature of the data allows for a model of 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 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. I further use the 2016 ANES time series (ANES 2017) to evaluate the durability of the effect of the 2012 presidential election.

[6] Indeed, the one previous study to note a relationship between battleground mobilization and political interest used only cross-sectional correlations (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007). Nevertheless, it found a positive association between living in a battleground state and political interest, particularly among the poor, consistent with the findings of this project.

[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 online appendix Table A1.

[8] All models include provided weights to approximate a representative sample.

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 data set produced by Darr and Levendusky (2014).[10] The county-level analysis further includes US Census data for county-level controls.[11]

Finally, both Enos and Fowler (2016) and Darr and Levendusky (2014) provide a breakdown of campaign activity by candidate. Enos and Fowler acquired the Obama campaigns prioritization of each state and further estimated the "average effort level of the Romney campaign in each state" (2016, 5). Darr and Levendusky further disentangle the number of offices of each campaign in each county (2014).[12] This allows for the evaluation of the differential impact of the two campaigns. This is important given the fact that Obama's campaign is believed to have been more infiltrative.

5. Findings

5.1 Living in a Battleground State Increases Political Interest

Initial analysis demonstrates a relationship between living in a battleground state in 2012 and an increase in measured interest in politics. A simple bivariate regression of the change in interest on 2012 battleground status (Column 1, Table 1) reveals that living

[9]Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

[10]Descriptive statistics for both battleground state assignment in 2012 and field office placement are included in the online appendix Table A2.

[11]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.

[12]Darr and Levendusky lacked data for Alaska's field offices in 2012. Using Federal Election Commission data, I identified that Obama had one field office in Anchorage County and Romney had no field offices in Alaska. This tracks with state-level office counts available from other sources (Panagopoulos and Weinschenk 2015).

in a battleground state increased political interest by 0.064 points between 2010 and 2014.

By using a first-differences model,[13] we have accounted for all time-invariant confounders. For example, it is not a concern if the effect of being a born-again Christian on interest in politics is correlated with battleground status, as this is inherently controlled for in the model. However, *time-variant* confounding is still possible. For example, if the effect of being a born-again Christian on interest in politics *changes* between 2010 and 2014 and this change is correlated with battleground status. However, none of the usual suspects seem to impact the observed association. Both including individual pre-treatment controls for a standard set of demographics[14] (Column 2, Table 1) and including results from the 2008 presidential election[15] (Column 3, Table 1) simply increases the relative magnitude and precision of the estimate.

Given that interest in politics is measured with a 4-point scale, ceiling effects are a genuine concern. Yet, including baseline political interest in 2010 to allow for a ceiling effect increases the point estimate compared to the basic model (Column 4, 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 5. However, the direction of the effect is what would be anticipated if there were a ceiling effect: the higher one's pre-treatment interest, the less the campaign can increase one's interest.

Additionally, a placebo test, comparing the association of battleground status with interest "pre-treatment", i.e. before the 2012 presidential compare, and "post-treatment",

[13] A first differences model is equivalent to a unit-fixed effects model with two periods but facilitates the inclusion of time-variant confounders in the model.

[14] The individual level controls are all measured "pre-treatment" in 2010. They are income level, education level, gender identity, party ID, age, racial identity, born-again Christian, marital status, immigration status, and union membership status. Descriptive statistics for these variables are available in the online appendix (Table A3 - Table A9). Removing one control at a time to test the robustness of the association between battleground status and change in interest to co-variate selection reveals that it is equivalent in magnitude and statistically significant at the p = .05 level in all cases (results available in Table A10).

[15] Four variables are taken from the 2008 election: (1) state-level turnout as a percent of the voting-age population, (2) Democratic vote share, (3) Republican vote share, and (3) "competitiveness." Competitiveness is the absolute value of the difference between the vote share of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates.

Table 1: **Primary Analysis**: Association between battleground status and change in political interest; with and without standard individual controls; with and without 2008 election results; with and without controlling for pre-treatment interest in politics.

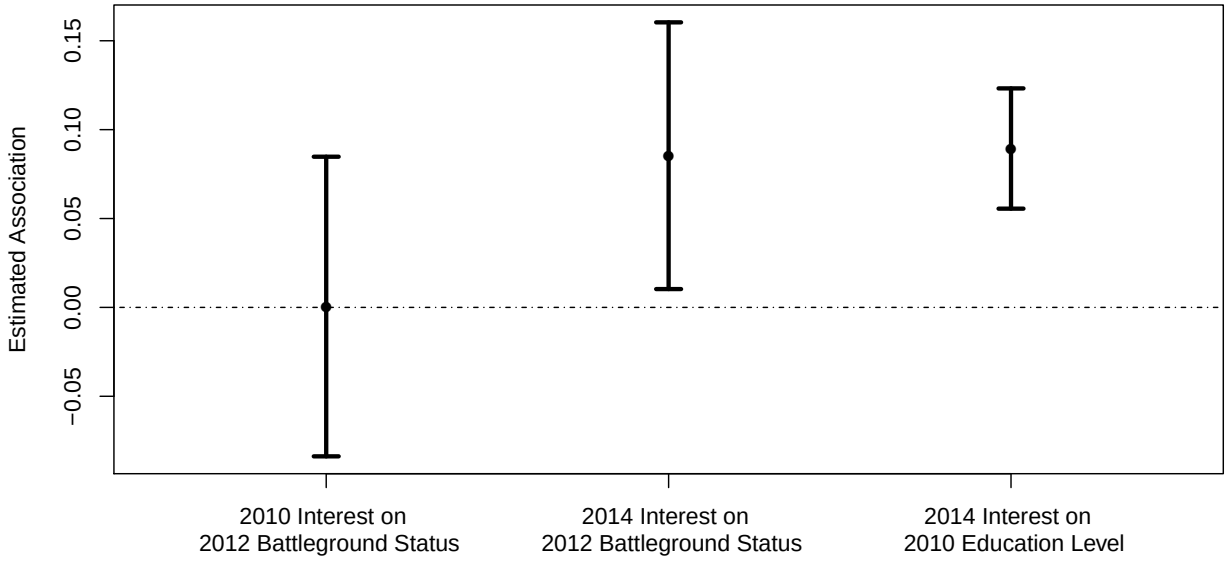
	Change in Political Interest Between 2010 and 2014				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Battleground 2012	0.064**	0.074**	0.095**	0.070***	0.186
	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.042)	(0.027)	(0.117)
Interest 2010				−0.304***	−0.293***
				(0.022)	(0.026)
Dem. Share 2008			−0.037		
			(0.036)		
Rep. Share 2008			−0.032		
			(0.035)		
Turnout 2008			0.206		
			(0.241)		
Competitiveness 2008			0.002		
			(0.002)		
Battleground:Interest 2010					−0.049
					(0.041)
Constant	−0.044**	0.123	3.354	0.522***	0.498***
	(0.019)	(0.161)	(3.541)	(0.145)	(0.154)
DF	9428	9347	9343	9346	9345
Ind. Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01
All standard errors are clustered at the state level.
Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative.
Estimated coefs. for controls (columns 2-5) available in the online appendix Table A11.

i.e. after the campaign, provides further confidence in the authenticity of this estimated effect. Bars 1 and 2 of Figure 1 respectively show the results of a bivariate regression of 2012 battleground status on political interest in 2010 (the placebo) and 2014. As expected, living in a battleground in 2012 has no relationship with interest in 2010, but it had a substantial relationship in 2014.[16]

[16]Given the overlap between states which were battlegrounds in 2008 and 2012, this might not necessarily be 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 matched 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. If 2008 did motivate increased interest, in a way that confounds results, it is likely suppressing the effect, making reported point estimates conservative. This is because those who are still disinterested in battleground states in 2012, despite the 2008 mobilization, would be the

Figure 1: **Mobilization Effect Size in Comparison:** Estimated association of 2012 battleground status with pre-treatment political interest (Bar 1) and post-treatment political interest (Bar 2). Estimated association of 2010 education with political interest in 2014 (Bar 3). Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Models use CCES provided weights and cluster standard errors at the state level. Full models for these estimates are available in the online appendix Table A12.



Education is one of the best-established and most substantively important correlates of interest (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). This correlation is visible in Bar 3 of Figure 1, which shows the bivariate association of interest in 2014 with respondents' pre-treatment education levels.[17] Yet, despite education's great importance, living in a battleground state is estimated to have had an equivalent correlation with interest in 2014 as having an additional diploma or degree.[18]

Another way to put the magnitude of this estimated effect into context is that this effect size is, conservatively[19], equivalent to 1 out of every 47 people going from the minimum of following politics "hardly at all" to the maximum of caring about it "most

harder-to-motivate citizens compared to those who are disinterested in spectator states who lacked the 2008 election motivating the low-hanging fruit. If we compare Columns 2 and 3 of Table 1, these results are consistent with that expectation. Controlling for the 2008 election results increases the magnitude of the estimated effect of living in a battleground state in 2012.

[17]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.

[18]The association of education with 2014 interest rather than change in interest is adopted for this comparison 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.

[19]I say conservatively because this reflects the smallest of the four relevant point estimates in Table 1.

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.[20] For reference, North Carolina was won in 2012 by approximately 92,000 votes.

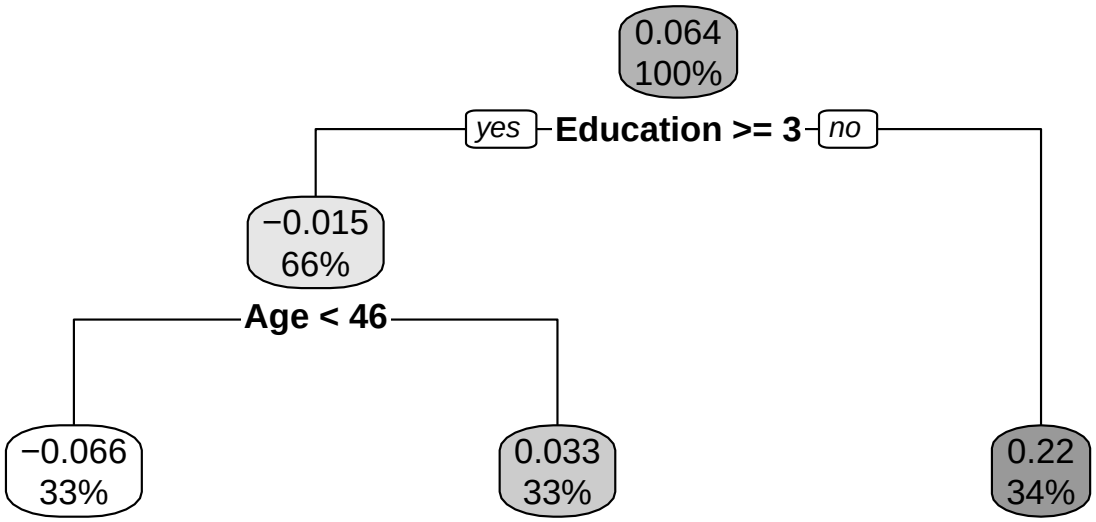
5.2 The Impact of the Campaign is Strongest Among Those Normally Left Out

While the effect is substantial when estimated for the overall 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 heterogeneous effects, I implement an "honest tree" (Athey and Imbens 2015). This is a machine learning technique which allows for the identification and estimation of heterogeneous treatment effects and is "honest" in that "one sample [of the data set] is used to construct the partition and another [sample of the data set is used] to estimate treatment effects for each sub-population" (Athey and Imbens 2015, 1). By splitting the data, this strategy avoids some traditional "data mining" concerns when identifying heterogeneous treatment effects.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the effect is almost 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 naturally from a theory in which those with abundant exposure to politics (due to education) develop a reliable disinterest, while those who are less likely to regularly encounter politics are more susceptible to being influenced by a political interaction. In this way, campaign mobilization appears to be able to compensate for socio-economic conditions which would otherwise cause one to be more likely to disengage.

[20] According to US Secretary of Commerce, the voting age population of North Carolina in 2012 was 7,465,545 and of Georgia was 7,429,820 (Blank 2013).

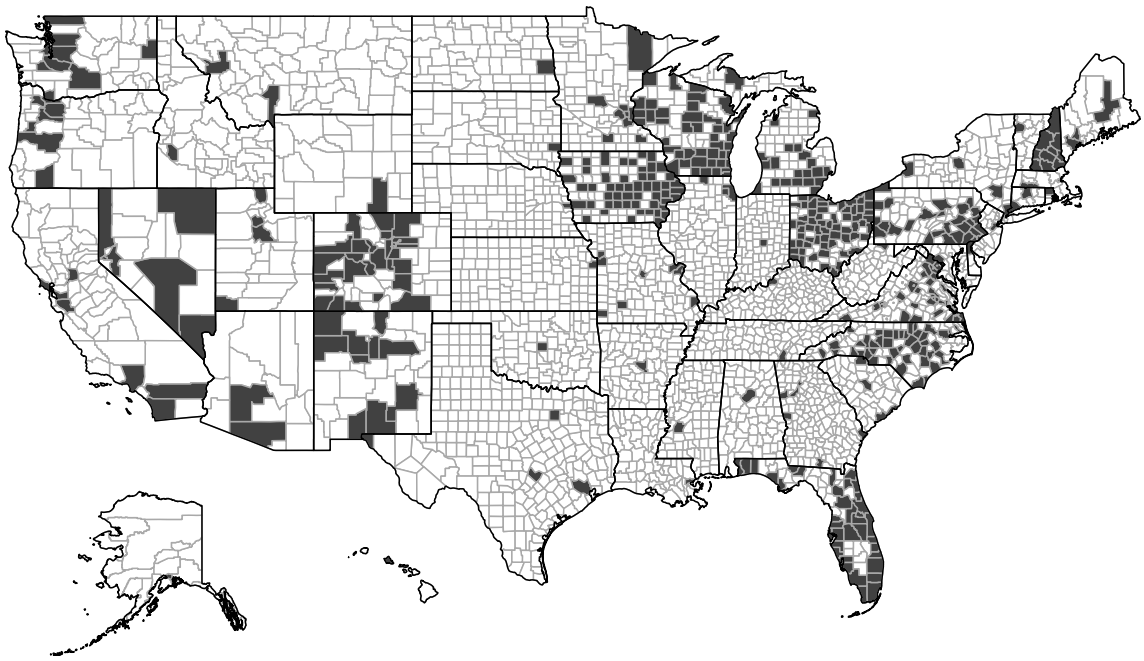
Figure 2: **Heterogeneous Treatment Effects:** A causal tree estimating heterogeneous treatment effects of 2012 battleground status on change in political interest (2010-2014). All individual-level demographic co-variates were included in the identification of appropriate segmentation of the population. Each oval contains the size of the effect for the indicated subgroup and the percent of the weighted population in that subgroup. The first cut indicates that for those with at least a 2-year degree ("Education >= 3"), the estimated effect size is -0.015, for those without a college degree ("Education < 3") the effect size is 0.22. Age ranges from 18 to 91. The tree uses a minimum weighted sub-population size of 400 out of 9500 and 20-fold cross-validation for this analysis. A tree with minimum weighted sub-population size of 150 (allowing for additional cuts) is available in online appendix Figure 2A.



5.3 The "Ground Game" Drives the Effect

A further consideration is whether it was the infiltrative campaign that produced the observed association or merely a sense that "my vote matters" in battleground states. One way to get at this question is to see if there is variation in change in interest due to 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). Local personalized engagement, such as door-to-door canvassing, is more difficult to tune-out than general political media. You can just flip the channel to a *Friends* rerun when the news comes on, but it is harder to dismiss a friend to their face when they try to engage you.

Figure 3: **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.



I, therefore, evaluate the relationship between change in interest and the number of field offices per 100,000 people at the county level in 2012. As visible in Figure 3, while field offices are more common in battleground states, there is notable variation within states.[21] This alternative specification of campaign mobilization is further a means of corroborating the effect established in the previous sections, as an unobserved confounder would have to predict battleground status at the state level, change in political interest at the individual level, and the number of field offices per person at the county level.

As can be seen in Column 1 of Table 2, field offices per 100,000 persons in a county is substantially associated with change in interest. This association only becomes stronger when I include controls for individual characteristics and county-level demographics,

[21] The figure reflects a binary coding for clarity (office or no office), however, the analysis uses the number of field offices per 100,000 people.

Table 2: **Field Offices and Interest:** Association of field offices per 100,000 in a county with change in political interest; with and without individual and county level controls; with and without 2012 battleground status; with and without sub-setting by battleground status.

	Change in Political Interest Between 2010 and 2014				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
2012 Field Offices	0.040**	0.059***	0.058***	0.072***	0.085*
	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.048)
2012 Battleground			0.004		
			(0.055)		
Constant	−0.049**	1.501*	1.497*	−8.632	1.272
	(0.022)	(0.850)	(0.855)	(9.237)	(0.965)
DF	9428	9333	9332	2264	7029
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sample	Full	Full	Full	Battleground	Spectator

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01
All standard errors are clustered at the county level.
Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative.
Estimated coefs. for controls (columns 2-5) available in the online appendix Table A13.

including 2008 county-level election results (Table 2, Column 2).[22] Moreover, the previously observed effect of battleground status on change in interest is entirely driven by the "ground game." Including both field offices and battleground status in the model, I find that every 1 field office per 100,000 persons is associated with a statistically significant increase of 0.062 points in political interest, while the main battleground effect becomes indistinguishable from 0 (Table 2, Column 3). That it is the on-the-ground campaign effort that matters is further validated by the fact that the effect of field offices on change in interest is observed both in battleground states (Column 4) and in spectator states (Column 5).[23] In other words, it is the campaign, not being a "battleground," that matters.

An additional means of testing the importance of the in-person campaign

[22]The individual controls are the same as those in the previous models. County-level controls are the log of total population in 2010, log of voting age population in 2010, Democratic vote share in 2008, Republican vote share in 2008, electoral turnout in 2008, election competitiveness in 2008, percent white in 2010, percent black in 2010, percent Hispanic in 2010, median income in 2009, poverty rates in 2009, unemployment in 2010, share of people over 25 with a bachelor's degree (2005-2009), and share of people over 25 with a high school diploma (2005-2009). These controls are taken from US Census data.

[23]Though in the case of spectator states, while the association is greater in magnitude, the estimate is shy of conventional statistical significance (p = 0.075).

Table 3: **Comparing Obama and Romney's Campaigns:** Association of Obama prioritization, Romney effort, Obama field offices, and Romney field offices with change in political interest; with and without controlling for battleground status.

	Change in Political Interest Between 2010 and 2014			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Obama Priority	0.301^{***}	0.357^{***}		
	(0.116)	(0.098)		
Romney Effort	-0.259^{*}	-0.661^{***}		
	(0.145)	(0.162)		
2012 Battleground		0.240^{***}		0.007
		(0.045)		(0.055)
Obama Offices			0.068^{***}	0.066^{***}
			(0.023)	(0.024)
Romney Offices			0.034	0.031
			(0.045)	(0.050)
Constant	2.231	3.654	1.480^{*}	1.473^{*}
	(3.310)	(2.920)	(0.852)	(0.857)
DF	9342	9341	9332	9331
SE Clustering	State	State	County	County
Ind. Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County Controls	No	No	Yes	Yes

$^{*}p < .1$; $^{**}p < .05$; $^{***}p < .01$
Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative
Estimated coefs. for controls available in the online appendix Table A14.

is to compare the impact of the Obama and Romney mobilization efforts. "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). Given this commitment, we would expect 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. At the state level, living in a state which Obama prioritized in 2012 is highly associated with an increase in interest, while living in a state which Romney targeted had, if anything, a negative effect. Similarly, Obama field office placement predicts change in interest in politics better than general office placement, while Romney field offices do not appear to have any association with change

in interest.

5.4 The Change in Interest Appears Genuine

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 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 interest in politics, as that is what people interested in politics do." We do, after all, already know that participation increased in battleground states (Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck 2013). 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 includes measures of voting behavior[24] as well as 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[25] adding measures of: (1) registering to vote between 2010 and 2014, (2) voting in 2012, (3) voting in 2014, (4) voting and all measures of self-reported participation in 2012, (5) voting and self-reported participation in 2014, and (6) all available participation variables in 2012 and 2014. In these models, the coefficient on 2012 battleground status range from .087 to .095 and is always significant at conventional levels. Thus, it is unlikely that this observed association is the result of "epiphenomenal interest" due to changes in political participation.

Social Desirability Bias: There is a well-known social desirability bias when

[24]The CCES includes both matched voting records and participants' self-reporting on whether they voted. For this analysis, I use verified voting records.

[25]These models included pre-treatment individual controls as well as 2008 election results. Regression tables are available in the online appendix Tables A15 and A16.

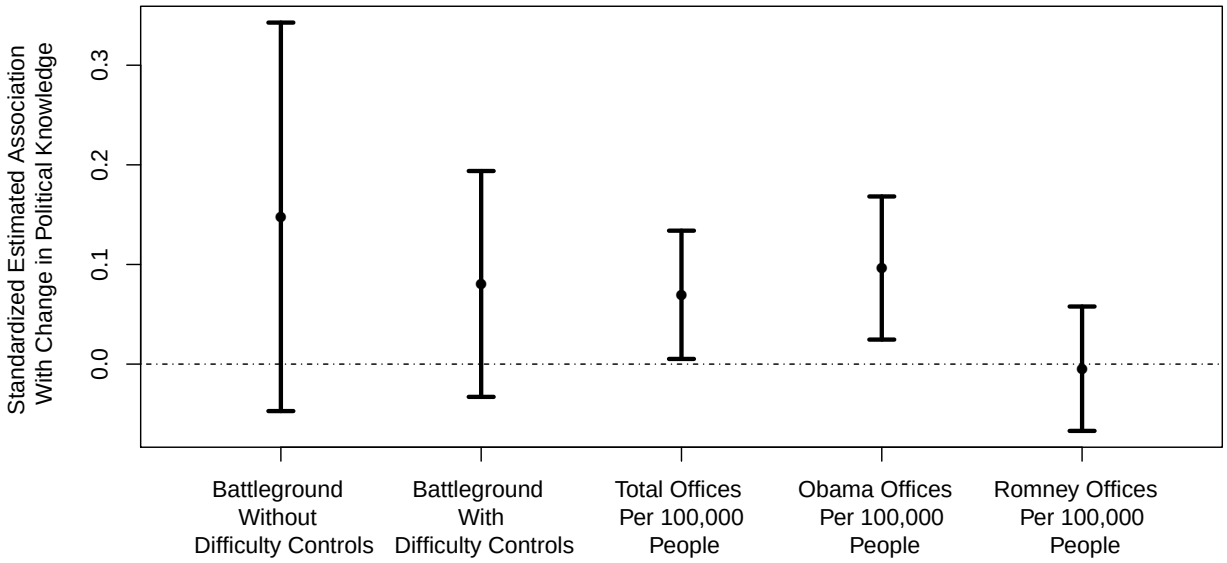
measuring interest in politics: few people "are willing to confess a very low level of interest for arts, science, and politics. These are 'worthy' domains that the 'good' citizen should say she has at least a modest degree of interest in" (Blais, Galais, and Bowler 2014, 9). It is possible that mobilization 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, not actual change in interest. To evaluate this, I adopt two strategies. First, 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: those who claim to have voted but did not according to administrative data. This can be thought of as a measure of susceptibility to social desirability bias.

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 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. The point estimate ranges from 0.089 and 0.096 and is always significant at conventional levels in all cases.[26]

A second, and even more compelling test, is whether the campaigns influenced 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

[26]These regressions are available in the online appendix Table A17. Intriguingly, only "Ever Over-Report" is statistically significant.

Figure 4: **Association Between 2012 Campaign and Change in Political Knowledge:** Standardized estimate of the association between battleground status, field offices per capita, and field offices of each party per capita respectively with aggregated political knowledge. Political knowledge is a combination of 6 measures, aggregated using principal component analysis. All models include individual controls and 2008 election outcome controls. The models producing bars 2-5 include question difficulty controls. The models producing bars 3-5 include county-level controls. Full models available in the online appendix Table A18 and A19.



and which party controls the House of Representatives.[27] These binary variables are aggregated[28] 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 bar of Figure 4 shows the point estimate for the association of 2012 battleground status with a change in the index of political knowledge between 2010 and 2014 (including individual level controls and 2008 election results). As expected, the estimate is positive. However, the standard errors are quite large when clustered at the state level. This reflects a high level of intra-cluster correlation which is to be

[27]Given residents of Washington DC are not represented in Congress, this measure could not be constructed for the 11 respondents from that city, and they are therefore dropped for this portion of the analysis.

[28]I use the first component of a principal component analysis to identify the "latent variable" of political knowledge. Principal component analysis is a method that finds the linear projection that explains the maximum variance among multiple variables. However, using instead the simple average of the 6 measures produces nearly identical statistically significant point estimates, as visible in Table A18 and A19 of the online appendix.

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. To compensate, I include controls for the estimated difficulty of the questions in the state of residence in 2010 and in 2014.[29] As visible in Bar 2 of Figure 4, this considerably narrows the confidence interval, though the estimated effect is still not statistically significant at conventional levels. There are simply not enough clusters to achieve a precise with this much intra-cluster correlation when clustered at the state level. Fortunately, there is an option that expands the number of clusters.

Another way to compensate for the state-level intra-cluster correlation is to look at county-level variation. In the previous section, I showed that the observed effect of the battleground campaign on interest in politics was driven by the ground game, and specifically President Obama's campaign. Using these measures, rather than battleground status, shows that the more field offices in your county of residence in 2012, the more your political knowledge increased (Bar 3, Figure 4). Again, this was entirely driven by the Obama campaign (Bar 4), as the Romney campaign's field offices appear to have had no impact on political knowledge (Bar 5).

The effect size of an Obama field office is notable, a one standard deviation increase in the number of offices in your county (about 1 more field office per 37,000 people) is estimated to have resulted in a tenth of a standard deviation increase in knowledge. Thus, it appears that the 2012 presidential campaign mobilization did increase political knowledge. This adds confidence to the original analysis of the effect of the campaign on interest, as it seems it is not merely a reflection of a change in social desirability bias, as knowledge is hard to fake, but was rather a genuine difference in psychological

[29] To estimate the difficulty, I create a weighted average of the knowledge measure in 2010 by state. This creates a state-level measure of question difficulty, which I then use to create two individual level difficulty measures for their state of residence in 2010 and in 2014. Note that I use the weighted average of knowledge in 2010 for both the difficulty in state of residence in 2010 and the difficulty in state of residence in 2014 because using the weighted average in 2014 would include "post-treatment" controls.

engagement with politics.

Constant Cause: It might not be that motivation is changing, but rather that recruitment is changing and that is reflecting in motivation. A competitive election in 2012 might result in changes in party infrastructure that continue to engage citizens' interest in politics in 2014. 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-person or in any way by a campaign in 2014, or if the level of contact (both any and in-person) had changed between 2010 and 2014, produces no notable change in the point estimate of battleground election or its significance.[30]

Yet, it may not be campaign infrastructure but the general "ethos" of a community that changes as a result of a competitive election. To tackle this question, I evaluate the effect of moving states between 2012 and 2014. Interestingly, while moving states does have a dramatically negative effect on one's interest in politics, the effect of having lived in a battleground state in 2012 does not notably change. Moreover, when these two variables are interacted, the interaction term is not significant at conventional levels.

However, 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 changed states between 2012 and 2014. To increase the sample of people who moved, I consider instead those who changed counties between 2012 and 2014. Given I have previously established that the effect of the campaign was localized to the county level and that moving is meant to capture the effect of leaving one's political community infrastructure, this is a useful test. Again, the interaction term is not statistically significant while battleground state is and the estimated effect of living in a battleground state is unchanged.[31] In combination with the fact that campaign contacts did not influence the battleground effect, this provides support for the idea that it is actually dispositional interest in politics which is changing.

[30] Regression tables available in the online appendix Table A20 and Table A21.
[31] Regression tables available in the online appendix Table A22.

Table 4: **The 2016 Election**: Association between 2012 battleground status and interest in politics with standard individual controls, 2008 election results, and 2016 battleground status, both measured subjectively by respondents and via media assessment. Interest in politics is the first component of a PCA of either 7 measures of general political interest ("General") or 21 measures of general political interest and political news interest ("Total").

	Political Interest in 2016			
	General	Total	General	Total
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Battleground 2012	0.037***	0.027**	0.049**	0.036**
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.019)	(0.015)
Battleground 2016 (subj.)	−0.043***	−0.031***		
	(0.009)	(0.008)		
Battleground 2016 (media)			−0.028	−0.021
			(0.019)	(0.015)
Income	0.612	−0.134	0.661	−0.125
	(0.877)	(0.744)	(0.892)	(0.753)
DF	3181	3168	3196	3181

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01
All standard errors are clustered at the state level.
Weights are included to make the sample nationally representative.
Individual demographic and 2008 electoral outcome controls are included.
Estimated coefs. for controls available in the online appendix Table A23.

5.5 Political Interest Sparked in 2012 Burned on into 2016

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 latent attitudinal variables such as political interest (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008). As a result, the corroboration of the results from the aggregated ANES data with those of the CCES data (which only included one measure of interest) will lend increased credence to the above findings, signifying that they 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 14 variables that capture how much political media the respondent consumes, with I combine with the general interest questions to create a total political interest measure. I use principal component analysis 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.[32]

I regress these two outcomes on 2012 battleground status, the results of which are visible in Table 4. I use an equivalent set of demographic controls to those used in the panel analysis as well as the 2008 election results. 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. I alternatively also use whether media sources identified respondent's state as a battleground state.[33] Again, 2012 battleground status has a statistically significant positive association with both measures, indicating that the association is durable into 2016. Furthermore, the effect is only somewhat attenuated. In 2014, 2012 battleground status, with comparable controls, was associated with an increase in interest of 19% of a standard deviation, in 2016 the association was about 15% of a standard deviation.[34]

[32]I alternatively aggregated using the scaled average, this produced nearly identical results. Regression tables are available in the online appendix Table A24.

[33]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, and neither was known for running a particularly effective "ground game," this is perhaps unsurprising.

[34]The exact size of the effect is dependent on the inclusion or exclusion of controls. For comparability, I use individual and 2008 electoral controls in both cases. For the 2016 analysis, I use the most conservative estimate: using the total political interest measure and the subjective measure of 2016 battleground status.

6. *Some* Campaigns Are Investments in Democracy

In this paper, 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 - as it has implications for political actors and scientists alike. As Hersh has demonstrated, politicians are increasingly targeting likely voters (2015). 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, which the project is indebted to, 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 nearly a decade. This is a valid position to take if you rely on prior research (Prior 2010) but not if we think that political mobilization can re-organize political engagement.

By analyzing the role of the 2012 presidential election in reshaping political interest, I show that mobilization can affect 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 it being epiphenomenal, social desirability bias,

constant cause, or measurement error. Finally, cross-sectional data from 2016 indicates that the effect has staying power.

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 requires 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.

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