

Voter Mobilization 101: Presidential Campaign Visits to Colleges and Universities in the 2016 Election

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ABSTRACT Presidential candidates frequently hold campaign events on college and university campuses. Yet, the frequency of and motivations for holding these events on-campus has not been subject to systematic empirical analysis. This article analyzes an original database of presidential campaign visits in 2016 to determine how often and why the candidates held their events on-campus. I find that colleges and universities hosted more campaign visits (16.9%) than any other type of venue in 2016. Also, the Democratic candidates apparently used these visits to mobilize young people to register and vote. Democrats (29.5%) visited campuses far more often than Republicans (8.2%), and—unlike Republicans—Democrats were significantly more likely to hold events on-campus, instead of at another venue, as the host-state’s voter registration deadline, its early voting period, or Election Day neared. This research informs scholars’ understanding of the role that young people, as well as colleges and universities, play in American electoral politics.

Young people, and college students in particular, are notorious for their (relative) disengagement from electoral politics—so much so that the leading text on this subject asks: *Is Voting for Young People?* Indeed, Wattenberg (2016) found that young people are far less likely than older people to vote in presidential elections, midterm elections, and party primaries; to register to vote; and to engage in political activism. In that case, it would only seem to make strategic sense that political parties are less likely to contact young people during a campaign (Beck and Heidemann 2014; Wattenberg 2016, 180) or to focus on issues of particular concern to youths (Wattenberg 2016, ch. 6).


Yet, in some ways, young people are ideal targets for campaign appeals. Why? First, there is a greater opportunity to change young people’s electoral behavior *precisely because* they are less likely to be registered to vote and to be in the habit of voting (Brody and Sniderman 1977). In other words, there are more non-voters for campaigns to convert among younger people. Second, young people are less likely to have strong partisan attachments, and they are more likely to vote for independent or minor party candidates (Erikson and Tedin 2015, 148). Thus, campaigns have a greater opportunity to influence not only whether but also for whom young people vote. Third, young people are

more likely than older people to identify as ideologically liberal (Erikson and Tedin 2015, 147; Wattenberg 2016, 141), and they tend to identify as Democrats (Pew Research Center 2016). Democratic campaigns, therefore, have a particular incentive to mobilize young (potential) voters. Finally, in contrast to many other groups of voters that campaigns might want to target, it is not difficult to find thousands of young people gathered in one place, in multiple locations within every state, on a daily basis. Where? On college campuses.

CAMPAIGNING ON CAMPUS

College and university campuses are widely regarded as “hotbeds of activism” (Van Dyke 1998) and often they are at the epicenter of political controversy—from antiwar protests in the 1960s to battles over free speech and hate speech today. When it comes to elections, probably the most common and visible on-campus efforts to influence student voting behavior are registration drives and other events organized by student-run clubs such as the College Republicans and College Democrats. However, these clubs typically are party subsidiaries and not, in any formal sense, part of an actual campaign organization. The most direct way in which the campaigns appeal to young people on college campuses is through candidate visits.

High-profile candidate visits to college campuses have become staples of modern presidential campaigning, and their apparent objective typically is to register and turn out young voters.

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For instance, in the past three presidential campaigns, the Democratic nominees—Barack Obama in 2008 (Johnson 2008) and 2012 (Vardon 2012); Hillary Clinton in 2016 (Pelzer 2016)—each held a major campaign rally at The Ohio State University on the day before Ohio's voter registration deadline. Vardon's (2012) description of the 2012 rally is typical: "Obama used his trip here as a push for supporters to register and vote. Buses were parked on Ohio State's campus to take people to an early voting center after the speech to do just that."¹

The political science literature provides few answers but raises many questions regarding the frequency and strategic significance of presidential campaign visits to college campuses. First and foremost, this is because nearly all studies of presidential campaign visits use geographic areas (e.g., states, counties, and media markets) as their units of analysis. To date, only West (1983) has analyzed the *audiences* for presidential candidates' visits, with one category (of 40) being college students. Interestingly, he found that college students, along with business people, were the most common substantive audiences for candidate visits during the 1980 presidential primaries (approximately 5%).² However, there has been no comparable study of campaign visits in elections since then, nor any studies directly focusing on the strategic significance of on-campus visits. Furthermore, it is unclear from the existing literature whether the primary function of a campaign visit is to persuade swing voters (Hillygus and Shields 2008) or to mobilize a party's base (Althaus, Nardulli, and Shaw 2002; Holbrook and McClurg 2005). In some cases, their strategic functions seem to vary by candidate (Chen and Reeves 2011; Devine 2018).

appealing to persuadable voters.) Hypothesis 2 proposes that presidential candidates, in general, are more likely to hold their events on-campus as the host-state's voter registration deadline or its start date for voting draws near, indicating that this choice of venue serves a strategic purpose targeted at young voters. (Alternatively, campaigns might choose campuses merely for practical reasons, such as the quality and accessibility of their facilities; if so, then a visit's timing should be unrelated to whether it is held on-campus versus elsewhere.) Hypothesis 3 refines the preceding hypothesis by positing a partisan difference in the timing of on-campus visits, consistent with a Democratic mobilization strategy. Specifically, it proposes that hypothesis 2 applied only to the Democratic candidates (i.e., Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine) and not the Republican candidates (i.e., Donald Trump and Mike Pence) in 2016.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge that campaigns do not choose venues for their events based on strategic considerations alone; indeed, they also must factor in various practical considerations (e.g., the venue's seating and parking capacity, cost, security, and proximity to other campaign destinations). Neither is the selection of a venue associated with a particular population group necessarily indicative of a campaign strategy to target that group for votes. I do not suggest—nor should this study be interpreted as validating—such a sweepingly strategic interpretation of all campaign visits. Rather, I propose hypotheses 1–3 in order to identify a pattern of results that—if supported by the evidence presented—would be consistent with the notion that these campaign visits, generally speaking, are strategically calculated to mobilize college students.

So, how often do presidential candidates hold campaign events on college campuses? And why do they choose to visit campuses rather than other possible venues? Is it simply because campuses tend to have accessible, high-quality facilities that can host large crowds of people, regardless of age? Or is the goal to appeal to young people, specifically?

So, how often *do* presidential candidates hold campaign events on college campuses? And *why* do they choose to visit campuses rather than other possible venues? Is it simply because campuses tend to have accessible, high-quality facilities that can host large crowds of people, regardless of age? Or is the goal to appeal to young people, specifically? For instance, are the campaigns more likely to schedule visits to college campuses close to voter registration deadlines or the election? And do both parties visit campuses equally, in a competition to persuade relatively unattached voters? Or do Democrats disproportionately visit campuses, in hopes of mobilizing left-leaning youths?

This article uses data on presidential and vice presidential campaign visits in the 2016 election to answer these important research questions. First, I report the percentage of campaign visits in 2016 that took place on college campuses versus other types of venues. Then, I evaluate the strategic motivations for these visits by testing three research hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 proposes that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to hold their campaign events on-campus, because they are trying to mobilize party supporters.³ (Alternatively, Republicans might visit campuses more often, in hopes of

Although this methodological approach requires interpretation, I find it difficult to imagine a credible alternative explanation—much less a more convincing one—for the pattern of results outlined above.⁴

DATA AND METHODS

I tested the preceding research hypotheses using an original database of presidential campaign visits in 2016. This database includes each presidential or vice presidential visit (counted separately for joint appearances) made between a given party's vice presidential announcement (i.e., July 15 for Republicans, July 22 for Democrats) and Election Day (i.e., November 8). For this analysis, *campaigns visits* are defined as any public appearance apparently organized or initiated by the campaign or its candidates for the purpose of appealing to a localized concentration of voters. This definition excludes various nationally-oriented events (e.g., national party conventions, national political or business conferences, debates, and historical commemorations), as well as events in which the public and/or the press were prohibited from participating (e.g., private fundraisers and closed press conferences).⁵

I classified each visit as occurring at one of 15 “venue types,” using media reports to identify where an event took place and the venue’s website to ascertain key characteristics. Following West (1983, 520), I used an inductive approach to develop these classifications, with the resulting venue types as follows: Airports

Table 1 also shows significant partisan differences. Clinton and Kaine held 62 (29.5%) of their 210 campaign visits at colleges and universities—far more often than at any other type of venue. In fact, only one—Places of Business (33, or 15.7%)—hosted more than half as many Democratic visits. However, Trump and

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(hangar, tarmac); Arenas/Convention Centers (arena, stadium, convention center, conference center, expo center, sports training center); Banquet and Events Centers; Campaign Offices; Churches; Fairgrounds (general grounds, fairgrounds arena, state fair); Government Facilities (community center, recreation center, fire station, Air National Guard, town hall, train station); Hotels/Resorts/Clubs (hotel, resort, casino, private country club, private social club, private community clubhouse); Nonprofits (museum, market, medical center, family services, arts education, Boys and Girls Clubs, Fraternal Order of Police lodge, American Legion post); Places of Business (restaurant, café, bar, farm, privately owned market, retail store, service center, manufacturing site, corporate office); Public Spaces (street, outdoor park); Schools (public/private/charter school for pre-kindergarten through high school); Theaters (performing arts center, amphitheater, auditorium, studio); Union Offices (union hall, union training center); and Universities (public or private college/university, higher education center).

In addition to providing descriptive statistics regarding the frequency with which campaign visits took place on college campuses versus other venues, I tested hypotheses 1–3 using t-tests and logistic regression analyses. The dependent variable in each analysis was coded 1 for an on-campus visit and 0 for visits to other venues. In other words, the dependent variable captured whether the campaign, *having chosen to hold an event*, held it on a college campus or elsewhere.

The independent variable in each model represents the number of days before one of three strategic dates that a campaign visit occurred. Those dates include the host-state’s voter registration deadline; the host-state’s start date for voting (i.e., early voting or Election Day); and the national Election Day (i.e., November 8).⁶ For each independent variable, I coded the relevant target date as 0 and subtracted from it the number of days beforehand that a given visit occurred. For example, in North Carolina, voter registration ended on October 14 and early voting started on October 20. Thus, an October 10 visit to North Carolina would be coded –4 on the registration variable; –10 on the start-of-voting variable; and –29 on the Election Day variable.⁷

ANALYSIS

More presidential campaign visits took place on college or university campuses in 2016 than at any other type of venue: 87, or 16.9%. As shown in table 1, visits to Arenas/Convention Centers were almost as common (86), but after that only Places of Business hosted more than half as many visits (65).

Pence held only 25 (8.2%) of their 305 campaign visits on-campus. They held many more events at Arenas/Convention Centers (77), Hotels/Resorts/Clubs (40), and Places of Business (32).⁸ This evidence provides strong support for hypothesis 1: Democrats were much more likely than Republicans to visit college campuses in 2016.⁹

My analysis also provides conditional support for hypothesis 2. The campaigns, in general, held events on-campus closer to Election Day ($M=-35.7, SD=3.7$) than their off-campus events ($M=-45.5, SD=1.7$), on average, and the difference is statistically significant ($t(513)=-2.384, p=0.018$). This evidence suggests a strategic basis for choosing to hold events on-campus—and not merely a practical one. The average on-campus visit also occurred closer to the host-state’s start date for voting ($M=-26.4, SD=3.6$) and its voter registration deadline ($M=-40.8, SD=4.5$) than an off-campus visit ($M=-33.5, SD=1.6; M=44.5, SD=1.7$). However, the difference for the start date for voting is only marginally significant ($t(513)=-1.810, p=0.071$); for voter registration, it is not statistically significant ($t(338)=-0.805, p=0.422$).

Table 1
Presidential Campaign Visits in 2016, by Host Venue Type

VENUE	TOTAL	REPUBLICANS	DEMOCRATS
Airports	21	20	1
Arenas/Convention Centers	86	77	9
Banquet & Events Centers	24	19	5
Campaign Offices	14	4	10
Churches	17	8	9
Fairgrounds	26	24	2
Government Facilities	26	10	16
Hotels/Resorts/Clubs	43	40	3
Nonprofits	15	8	7
Places of Business	65	32	33
Public Spaces	19	3	16
Schools	30	14	16
Theaters	35	21	14
Union Offices	7	0	7
Universities	87	25	62

But, if the timing of on-campus visits is indicative of campaign strategy, the evidence in table 1 suggests that the Democratic and Republican campaigns might have scheduled their on-campus visits differently. To evaluate hypothesis 3, then, I estimated a series of logistic regression models using the dependent variable (i.e., university=1, another venue=0) and one of the independent variables (i.e., timing of visit relative to the voter registration deadline, start date for voting, or Election Day) described previously. I estimated each model separately for Democratic versus Republican campaign visits.

For ease of interpretation, the model results are presented graphically in figures 1–3.¹⁰ The independent variable represents the number of days intervening between a campaign visit and the host-state’s voter registration deadline in figure 1; the host-state’s start date for voting in figure 2; and Election Day in figure 3. Each figure plots the independent variable’s coefficient and 95% confidence intervals, for Democratic (i.e., Clinton/Kaine) versus Republican (i.e., Trump/Pence) visits. Positive values indicate an increase in the likelihood of an on-campus visit as the relevant date drew nearer. The independent variable’s effect on the dependent variable is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ if its confidence intervals do not overlap with zero.

The independent variable is statistically significant in each of the Democratic campaign visit models and positively signed. This means that Clinton and Kaine were significantly more likely to hold their campaign events on college campuses rather than at other venues close to the date on which voters in that state had to register and could vote. However, the same is not true for Trump and Pence; the independent variable is not statistically significant in any of the Republican models. This evidence suggests that the Democratic candidates visited college campuses so often because they had a specific strategic objective: to mobilize young people to register and to vote. Republicans, on the other hand, appear not to have pursued this mobilization strategy. Trump and Pence hosted their campaign visits on-campus much less often than Clinton and Kaine, and they were no more likely to do so close to a strategically relevant date (e.g., voter registration deadline and Election Day) than at earlier points in the campaign.

One plausible alternative explanation for this pattern of results is that Democrats, at least, visited campuses more often later in the campaign not for strategic reasons but rather because most students were on summer break earlier in the campaign (i.e., July and most of August). However, the evidence does not support this explanation. Classes were in session and students were on campus throughout the final 60 days of the campaign (i.e., September 9–November 7). But during the last 30 days—which encompassed nearly all voter registration deadlines and early voting periods as well as Election Day—Clinton and Kaine held 40% of their campaign visits on-campus, as compared to only 28% during the previous 30 days. Indeed, almost two-thirds of the Democratic candidates’ total on-campus visits (i.e., 40 of 62) took place during the campaign’s final 30 days.

Also, it is important to note that the candidates did not visit only large public universities throughout the campaign or when trying to mobilize voters late in the campaign. The Democratic candidates made 13 of their 62 campus visits (20.1%) to private colleges and universities,

Figure 1
Registration Deadline (Logit Model)

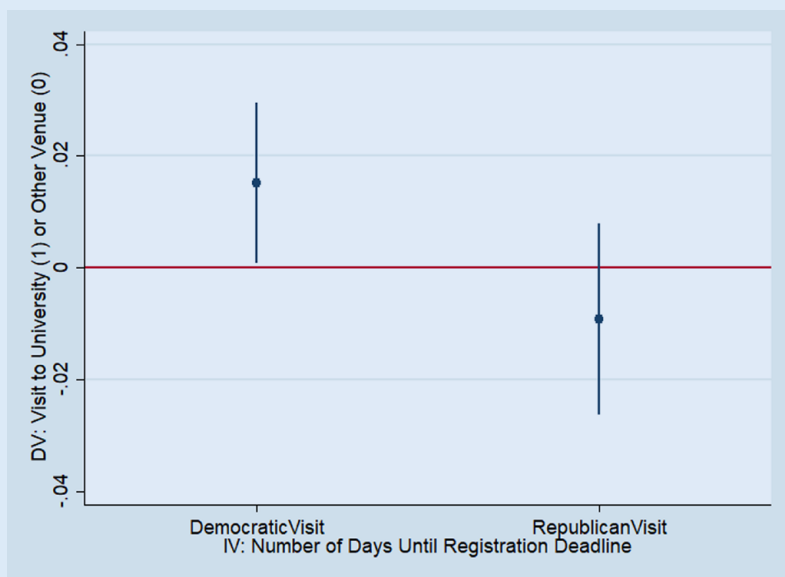
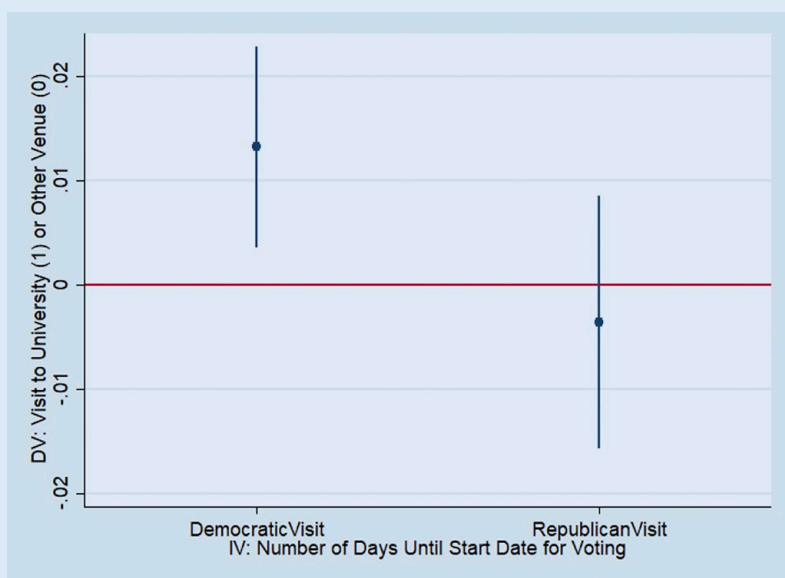


Figure 2
Start Date for Voting (Logit Model)



including 10 visits (25.0%) during the campaign's final 30 days. Similarly, the Republican candidates made seven of their 25 campus visits (28.0%) to private colleges and universities, including four visits (28.6%) during the campaign's final 30 days. In terms of enrollment, the Democratic candidates made 19 of their campaign visits (30.7%) to relatively "small" colleges—that is, those with fewer than 10,000 enrolled students—including 15 visits (37.5%) in the final 30 days. The Republican candidates made 12 of their campaign visits (50.0%) to small colleges and seven during the final 30 days (50.0%).¹¹ The phenomenon described here, then, does not just occur at Ohio State—notwithstanding my previous examples (and love for alma mater). It also occurs at Lackawanna College (i.e., Trump), Saint Anselm College (i.e., Clinton), Catawba College (i.e., Pence), and Kenyon College (i.e., Kaine).

CONCLUSION

This article provides a unique analysis of where and when presidential campaign visits took place in 2016, particularly with respect

campaign to mobilize college students via campaign visits; that is, Democrats apparently timed their visits strategically to encourage voter registration and turnout, whereas Republicans did not. Specifically, Clinton and Kaine were significantly more likely to hold their campaign events on a college campus instead of at another venue, as the date on which the host-state's voters had to be registered or could vote drew near. For Trump's and Pence's visits, I found no similar relationship.

This analysis is important for three reasons. First, it indicates that (presidential) campaigns *do* make significant efforts to mobilize young voters, despite their reputation for relative disengagement from the electoral process and previous research indicating that campaigns directly contact young people less frequently than older people. Perhaps, then, campaigns are not ignoring youths but more so trying to reach them in collective (e.g., campaign rally) rather than individual (e.g., door-knocking) settings—if only because their physical concentration on college campuses makes this strategy feasible in a way that it is not for other target groups.

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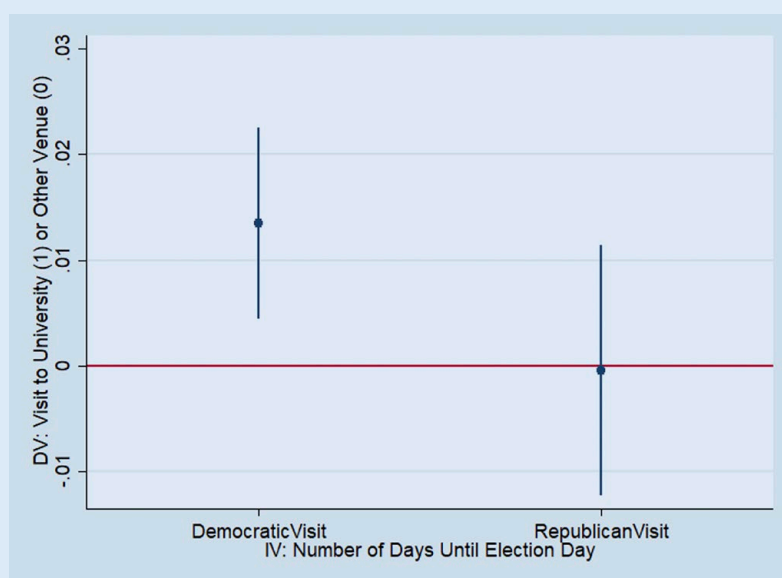
to the strategic implications of visits to college and university campuses. Three major research findings emerged from this analysis. First, a plurality of campaign visits (16.9%) took place on college campuses in 2016. Second, the Democratic candidates (29.5%) were much more likely than the Republican candidates (8.2%) to hold their campaign events on-campus. Third, this partisan disparity is indicative of an effort by the Democratic

Second, this research expands upon other scholars' efforts to understand how presidential campaigns use candidate visits to mobilize voters. Previous studies identified persuasion-versus-mobilization strategies based on the political and socio-demographic characteristics of the state or county in which campaign visits took place (Chen and Reeves 2011; Devine 2018). However, campaigns also must choose *where* within a geographic area to hold their events, and their choice of venue also might reflect whether they are trying to reach swing voters (i.e., persuasion) or base voters (i.e., mobilization). Indeed, this research indicates that Democrats tried to mobilize young people via candidate visits to college campuses in 2016.

Third, this study represents an all-too-rare effort to analyze the *who* and not just the *where* of presidential campaign visits. As West (1983, 516) observed: "researchers have not devoted much study to the allocation of travel time among various *constituencies*." Thirty-five years later, this statement still holds true—despite West's (1983, 516–17) compelling argument for conducting such analyses:

Constituency allocations are important because they reflect substantive priorities better than do states. State allocations represent strategic priorities, but it is difficult to uncover their substantive value because they are aggregate and heterogeneous units of geography. In contrast, allocation of travel time among particular constituencies (such as blacks, Hispanics, Jews, Catholics, and farmers, among others) can be interpreted more easily in substantive terms.

Figure 3
Election Day (Logit Model)



Scholars have failed to capitalize on West's profound insight, and this has limited subsequent efforts to understand how campaigns use candidate visits to shape their image and win votes. This article represents a renewed attempt at providing such analysis, albeit one narrowly focused on young voters and visits to college campuses, specifically.

There are many ways that scholars could build on this research to better understand the strategy and significance of presidential campaign visits. First, they could examine visits to other types of venues and audiences (e.g., churches and senior citizen groups) that might indicate persuasion-versus-mobilization strategies. Second, they could examine the *effectiveness* of venue-specific campaign visits at mobilizing voters by analyzing the relationship between these visits and voter registration or turnout among the targeted constituency. Third, this research could be extended to other election years and to other countries to determine whether its findings are generalizable.

To the extent that these findings are generalizable, they affirm the importance of college and university campuses in modern political life, and electoral politics specifically. Indeed, it would seem that college students are not as distant from the main event of American politics—the quadrennial presidential election—as many political observers assume. To the contrary: quite often, college students have a front row seat.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518002032>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association. I am grateful to Kurt Pyle and Kim Hixson for their helpful comments at that time, and to Kyle Kopko and Grant Neeley for their advice and encouragement. Finally, I thank the journal editors and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable contributions to this project. ■

NOTES

1. Obama also kicked off his reelection campaign in May 2012 with back-to-back rallies at Ohio State and Virginia Commonwealth University.
2. MacManus and Quecan (2008) also analyzed the audiences for campaign visits by the presidential and vice presidential candidates' spouses in 2004. Their data indicated that 6.9% of spousal visits took place among college students; this was the most common substantive audience category for three of the four spouses.
3. One might suspect that Democrats use campus visits to appeal to local voters as well, by selecting campuses in more Democratic-leaning and/or urban locales. However, in a separate analysis, I found no statistically significant differences in (county-level) past party voting or (county- and municipal-level) population density when comparing Democratic visits to college campuses versus other venues.
4. This methodology may not be appropriate for studying other venues associated with a certain population group (e.g., union halls and American Legion posts) because many such venues do not host enough campaign visits to permit reliable empirical analysis.
5. Visits were identified through announcements on websites sponsored by or affiliated with the campaigns. I confirmed each visit (and discovered several unannounced visits) through Internet searches by identifying two reliable sources (e.g., news article, video, and/or photograph) documenting whether, when, and where it occurred.
6. Information on state voter registration deadlines and early voting periods was obtained from the National Association of Secretaries of State website. Archived versions of the original URLs are available at <http://web.archive.org/>

- [web/20170210042430/http://www.nass.org/elections-voting/voter-registration-deadlines-polling-place-hrs-2016-general](http://www.nass.org/elections-voting/voter-registration-deadlines-polling-place-hrs-2016-general) (registration); <http://web.archive.org/web/20161108000017/http://www.nass.org/80/elections-voting/early-voting-dates-absentee-ballot-deadlines-2016-general> (early voting). Accessed November 1, 2018.
7. For the registration variable, I excluded all visits that took place in a given state after its voter registration deadline had passed because at that point, it was impossible and thus irrelevant for the campaigns to mobilize potential registrants. For states with multiple voter registration deadlines (e.g., mail, online, and in-person), I used the latest date. For states that allowed Election Day registration, following an earlier deadline, I coded the voter registration deadline as November 8 (i.e., Election Day). For the start date for voting variable, I coded each day during the early voting period as zero because immediate mobilization was possible at that time.
 8. It is possible that some partisan differences were unique to the Trump campaign and not typical for Republicans in all elections. For instance, the fact that Trump owned a private jet and used it for campaign travel might help to explain the partisan disparity in airport visits. However, in a separate, preliminary analysis of 2012 campaign visits, I found that the Romney/Ryan ticket held a higher percentage (14.6%) of its events at airports than the Trump/Pence ticket (6.6%). Also, I found that the Democratic ticket (23.5%) visited college campuses more often than the Republican ticket (14.1%) in 2012.
 9. The difference in proportions is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.
 10. For full model results, see tables A1 and A2 in the online appendix.
 11. The institutional data used for this analysis are from *U.S. News and World Report*. Available at www.usnews.com/best-colleges. Accessed November 1, 2018.

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