

Persuasion and Persistence: A Large-Scale Field Experiment in a Presidential Campaign

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Abstract

Political persuasion is a trait that is readily seen in laboratory settings but difficult to observe in the field. Enos and Hersh (2015) hypothesize that Presidential campaign grassroots efforts would be particularly bad at persuading voters since their volunteers are much more liberal than their persuasion targets. This paper reports the results of a large-scale persuasion experiment using volunteer callers conducted by the Obama re-election campaign in early 2012. Registered voters across 19 states were paired and randomly assigned to either receive a persuasive phone call from a volunteer or a control group that received no special attention from the same. Over the course of 4 weeks, volunteers attempted roughly 350,000 calls across 19 competitive states to persuade voters to vote for the President rather than his Republican opponent. Surveys conducted 2 - 5 days after the phone calls were attempted showed the calls improved assessments of Obama's performance in office and increased his vote share relative to his Republican opponent by 5 percentage points. To determine the decay of this persuasive effect, subjects in the experiment were surveyed again six weeks after the experiment ended. Roughly 80% of the initial persuasive effect was still present after this delay of 6 - 10 weeks. A subsequent follow-up survey found no evidence of persuasion 12 weeks out suggesting the persuasive effect was not permanent. This experiment helps demonstrate that political persuasion is possible even for the most salient and polarized offices and that the persuasion can be long-lasting but not permanent.

Introduction

During the last four days of the 2012 election, the Obama campaign boasted of having completed 125 million volunteer phone calls and door knocks (Dwyer 2012). The campaign had more than 800 staffed field offices across the country and had invested considerable staff time into assembling and organizing an army of dedicated volunteers (McKenna and Han 2015). While volunteer engagement provides good political optics, how best to utilize the resource is not always obvious. This chapter describes a large field experiment undertaken by the 2012 Obama re-election campaign to determine whether volunteers could be used effectively to make phone calls to persuade voters in battleground state.

Volunteer door knocks have shown to be effective at boosting voter turnout (Green et al. 2003) and voter registration (Nickerson 2015) for a wide variety of audiences (Bedolla and Michelson 2012). Some experiments have shown volunteer phone calls are effective at increasing voter turnout (Nickerson 2007), but the effect has been less consistent (Mann and Haenschen 2024). If volunteers were primarily useful for mobilization at the very end of an election, finding activities to keep volunteers engaged over the entire year would be a challenge. Having volunteers recruit volunteers for months on end might start to feel like a multi-level marketing scam. Persuasion calls would offer a useful campaign activity and solve a problem maintaining volunteer engagement and morale.

However, persuading voters in a Presidential election can be difficult to the extent that there is debate whether persuasion is even possible. Sides, Vavrek, and Warshaw (2023) estimate that when campaigns enjoy an advantage on television ads, every 100 ads increases vote share by roughly 2 percentage points, but the evidence that volunteers can generate such large effects is weaker – even earlier in the cycle (Kalla and Broockman 2018). Enos and Hersh (2015) provide a possible explanation

for this finding by noting that campaigns are much more liberal than their intended persuasion audience. If this ideological gap prevents effective persuasion, such volunteer calling efforts would be doomed to failure.

While the 2012 Obama campaign had faith in the efficacy of its volunteers, there were questions about how best to leverage this resource. The field department partnered with the analytics in the campaign to conduct what was, at the time, the largest field experiment undertaken by a political campaign to measure the effectiveness of volunteer persuasion phone calls. Conducting experiments within a political campaign differs from doing so in academic settings and there are specific challenges to orchestrating the efforts of thousands of volunteers. This chapter describes how the experiment was conducted in detail. While the ultimate estimate -- that receiving a phone call from a volunteer shifted vote choice by 5 percentage points and most of this effect persisted at least 6 – 12 weeks from the conversation -- is interesting, understanding the details of how the campaign executed the experiment and why may also be of interest to campaign scholars.

The Program / Treatment

While most Presidential campaigns struggle to recruit volunteers in each state as the primary rolls along, incumbent candidates can take advantage of volunteers from the prior election and assemble large teams of volunteers at the starting gate. Volunteer outreach was a vaunted – albeit untested – facet of the 2008 Obama campaign and one that the 2012 re-election campaign hoped to replicate. The past emphasis on grassroots mobilization provided an invaluable list of willing and experienced volunteers to make voter outreach. Even in January, the Obama team had the capacity to make nearly 1,000,000 volunteer phone calls weekly nationwide. The persuasion experiment would commandeer just over one-third of this capacity over the course of the experiment.

The script was drafted by a committee consisting of the campaign's messaging director, two training directors, leadership among field organizers, and the director of experiments. The script (see Appendix A) emphasized the campaign's overarching theme of "restoring the middle-class promise." After asking specifically for the targeted voter, volunteers introduced themselves and inquired "Have you thought about who you'll support in the election for President this year? Are you 100% certain of that?" If the target indicated she was 100% for Obama, the volunteer shifted to a volunteer recruitment message. If the target indicated she was 100% for Romney, the volunteer politely signed off while requesting the target "keep an open mind." If the target provided any other response, the volunteer began the persuasion portion of the script.

The persuasion portion of the script consisted of campaign talking points and revolved around the theme of "restoring the middle-class promise". It was suggested that volunteers check off the talking points that they believe in most firmly and read only those points in order to shorten and slightly personalize the message. After reading this section of the script, the volunteers closed by thanking the target for her time and hoping the information shapes the target's thoughts on the election.

The organizational model of the Obama campaign involved highly compartmentalized levels of leadership. In each state, paid staff members were organized into distinct geographic units. Each staff member was responsible for recruiting, training, and managing a set of neighborhood team leaders (or super volunteers), who in turn were responsible for a set of team members, each of whom often had specific tasks assigned to them. The organizational structure allows for reasonably close supervision of large numbers of callers and an efficient means of disseminating information.

The national training directors prepared training materials and went from state-to-state practicing reading the script, implementing the experiment, and emphasizing the importance of accurate data entry. Large training events were held at multiple locations around each state to maximize the number of volunteers who could attend. Paid staff were provided training materials to

train team members unable to attend one of the main training sessions. The net result is that callers tended to receive relatively homogeneous instruction and largely stuck to the assigned script and paid very careful attention to data entry.

The volunteers making the calls were literally anyone who showed up to a phone bank or logged into the dialing system. Nearly everyone went to a local phone bank, which would not be the case in post-pandemic campaigns, and there was no attempt to weed out volunteers. In that sense, the experiment has excellent external validity and accurately reflects the calls made by campaigns, albeit on a much larger scale than most campaigns. However, the callers at this early stage of the campaign tended to be slightly more experienced and older than the pool of volunteer who made calls for the campaign in September and October. However, that difference in experience diminishes rapidly after volunteers get a night or two of calling under their belts. Furthermore, these experienced volunteers also donate their time and skills to lower level campaigns down ballot more than the people signing up to volunteer for the Presidential campaign late in the season. Thus, it is possible that the calls used in this experiment are slightly higher quality than the average political campaign, but the difference is not sizable.

Data and Experimental Design

The backbone of the persuasion experiment was the national voter file maintained by the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Since the experiment was being conducted via phone, only voters for whom the DNC had a valid landline number available were included in the experiment. Estimates of volunteer calling capacity were made across 19 states¹ and a random sample of these voters² were drawn to accommodate these call targets with a little cushion. A short, automated survey

¹ AZ, CO, FL, GA, IA, IN, ME, MI, MN, MO, NC, NH, NM, NV, OH, OR, PA, VA, and WA.

² Prior to randomization, one randomly selected individual was selected among the set of voters sharing the phone number to “represent” the household.

about media consumption was then sent to each of these targeted individuals to ensure that the phone number to be dialed was still operational. The net result was a representative sample of 750,000 registered voters with valid landlines on file with the DNC.

These targeted individuals were then matched into pairs using a cascading exact matching algorithm based on 13 traits³. After initial pairings were made with all 13 traits, one trait was dropped and another pairing based on exact matches were made. This process was repeated until the final set of targets were paired based only on what state they lived in.⁴ Once these pairs were defined, a random number was generated for each member of the pair. The subject with the higher random number in the pair was assigned to the treatment group to be called and the subject with the lower random number in the pair was assigned to the control group. By design, the treatment and control groups were forced into perfect balance across observable traits.⁵

The subjects assigned to the treatment groups were then uploaded to the state data directors to distribute to the volunteers in the state. The numbers were placed in a random order to maintain the representativeness of the sample.⁶ Most of the states printed call sheets for volunteers to use and entered the data later that night after the volunteer shifts were completed. Calls were made during the evening and began January 23rd and ended February 24th. Each night, state data directors would upload the disposition of the calls back to headquarters in Chicago for processing. Over the course of the campaign, 345,481 numbers were attempted and 54,649 calls were completed, which represents a 16% contact rate.

³ The traits were geography, contactability score, support score, turnout score, age, gender, ethnicity, vote history, length of time on the phone with the automated survey, estimated education, missingness of data on file, party registration, and area code.

⁴ The pairing was computationally efficient and exhibited good balance across sample runs. Another pairing method (e.g., Mahalanobis distance) could possibly offer small gains in statistical efficiency but was not computationally feasible and would be irrelevant to causal identification.

⁵ We checked a few other variables that we did not match on to ensure that there was not a flaw in the randomization process. We never found a variable that appeared imbalanced.

⁶ Quality control checks were conducted each morning to ensure that the sample was representative.

Once a treatment phone number was attempted, both the attempted treatment number and its paired member of the control group were sent to an independent call center to be surveyed.⁷ The survey firms were not informed there was an experiment underway much less which individuals were in the treatment and control groups. The survey measurement calls were attempted two to three days after the initial volunteer call was attempted (i.e., a call Monday would be attempted by the survey firm on Wednesday or Thursday). The call center generally called a number for three days before retiring the number, so the survey would take place 48 to 120 hours after the initial volunteer attempt was made. Ultimately the calling houses completed 18,554 surveys with a roughly 9% response rate.

While covariate balance across treatment and control groups was assured at the time of assignment, it is possible that an imbalance could appear among survey respondents. For instance, we worried that registered voters assigned to the treatment group might be less willing to answer the survey because they were bothered on the phone a few days prior. Thankfully, there was no evidence of imbalance or differential attrition across treatment conditions among the survey respondents (see Table 1).

Table 1: Balance across treatment groups among survey respondents

Group	Female	Age	Black	White	Democrat	Unaffiliated	Republican	Support Score	Turnout Score
Control	58%	60	6%	91%	30%	37%	33%	46	73
Treatment	57%	60	6%	91%	30%	37%	33%	46	74

The survey was short to keep costs down and response rates high (see Appendix B for the script). The survey first asked about stated intended turnout in the November general election (yes, definitely; probably; 50/50; probably not; definitely not) to lead with a non-controversial question and gauge voter enthusiasm. The next two questions asked the respondent “if the election were held

⁷ The capacity of the volunteer operation outstripped the survey budget for this project, so it was not possible to survey every pairing attempted by volunteers. To maintain external validity, we randomly selected the pairs sent to the call center.

tomorrow, would you vote for Democrat Barack Obama or the Republican nominee” and then “if the election were held tomorrow, would you vote for Democrat Barack Obama or Republican Mitt Romney”.⁸ Moving vote choice is obviously the Holy Grail for any political persuasion program and it was feared it may be an unrealistic goal for a single volunteer call to move Presidential vote choice. With this in mind, the survey also used five-point scales to ask whether the respondent approved of Obama’s job performance and agreed that “Barack Obama had been effective as President”. If the phone calls failed to move vote choice, perhaps the assessment of Barack Obama would be more malleable and able to be modeled. The final non-demographic question⁹ inquired whether the respondent recalled campaign contact in the past few days. If the volunteer phone call was cutting through the background campaign and media noise, the treatment group should be more likely to report campaign contact than respondents in the control group. This question was put at the end of the survey to avoid coloring response to the earlier questions about the election.

The sample began as a representative sample of registered voters from battleground states with landlines in 2012, but the pool of respondents differs from this ideal starting point. One of the most notable differences between the overall sample and the survey respondents was with regards to contact rates. While the overall contact rate by volunteers was 16%, among the survey respondents the volunteer contact rate in the treatment group was 38%. Given that survey respondents are -- by definition -- the type of person who will answer the phone and talk to a stranger, this improvement in contact rate is not a surprise and improves the power of the experiment to detect treatment effects from the volunteer calls. The cost for this improvement in power is external validity; the experiment cannot speak to how non-respondents were moved by volunteer phone call. However, the sample

⁸ These two questions are so highly correlated ($r = 0.85$) that all the analysis reports the results from the Mitt Romney specific question. The results do not depend on which variable used.

⁹ The survey also asked the respondent for their year of birth and gender was recorded by the caller. This information was used to check the quality of the calls. Over the course of the campaign, 86% of the completed calls matched both on gender and age. The 18,554 completions reported all matched and gender.

truncation from the survey is unavoidable and probably less important for a phone based volunteer persuasion call that can only reach targets who answer the phone in any case. The bottom-line is that this experiment studying the actual phone calls made by a real campaign a large and representative sample of voters across states has more external validity than is typically found in a persuasion experiment.

Results

The first question the Obama campaign had was whether calls from volunteers would be noticed among the media coverage and general chatter about the campaign. To gauge the extent to which targets remembered the phone calls, the campaign compared the rate the treatment and control groups recalled “receiving any contact from a political campaign” (see Table 2, column “Recall”). In the control group, 23.4% recalled receiving contact, which was 15.1 percentage points (se= 0.7 pp) lower than the 38.5% who recalled contact in the treatment condition. Once we adjust this intent-to-treat estimate by the 38% contact rate, we estimate that those actually contacted in the treatment group were 39.6 percentage points (s.e. = 1.7 pp) more likely to recall contact than the control group. Not only is this estimate statistically significant, it nearly perfectly matches the actual rate of contact in the treatment, which was 38%. This suggests that the volunteer contact rose above the background noise of the campaign in February of the election year despite all the coverage of and activity from the Republican primary. That is, the volunteer phone calls were memorable.

Table 2: Difference of Means Across Treatment and Control Groups

	Recall	Approval	Effective	Obama	Romney	Two-Way	Intent to Vote
Treatment	0.385	2.88	2.81	0.393	0.424	0.481	0.883
Control	0.234	2.84	2.77	0.380	0.445	0.460	0.873

Difference	0.151 (0.007)	0.004 (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)	0.013 (0.007)	-0.021 (0.007)	0.021 (0.008)	0.009 (0.005)
Contact Rate	38%	38%	38%	38%	38%	38%	38%
ATE	0.396 (0.017)	0.101 (0.052)	0.105 (0.052)	0.035 (0.019)	-0.055 (0.019)	0.053 (0.021)	0.025 (0.013)
p-value	< 0.001	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.004	0.02	0.06
N	18543	17948	17957	18557	18557	15235	18554

Numbers in parentheses represent standard errors.

Estimated p-values are two-tailed.

Next the campaign wanted to know whether the volunteer phone call improved approval with and assessment of effectiveness of Barack Obama's first four years in office (see Table 2, columns Approval and Effective). The difference in the mean assessment of Barack Obama on a five-point scale for both those traits was subtle but borderline statistically significant. For both approval and effectiveness, assignment to the volunteer call condition shifted the mean 0.04 points (s.e. = 0.02). Adjusting for the contact rate, the estimated average treatment effect is just over 0.10 (s.e. = 0.052). The standard deviation on both the approval and effective scale was 1.7 points, so a shift of 0.1 points is not a large effect. Both measures, however, demonstrate that volunteer calls could shift the opinions of a few people about Obama's presidency.

The more important question was whether the volunteer phone call could shift vote choice. While the campaign ultimately cared most about the two-way horse race¹⁰, it was theoretically interesting whether the volunteer phone call increased support for Obama more or decreased support for Romney. On the one hand, public opinion on a sitting President should be much firmer than for a

¹⁰ The two-way horse race is defined as voting for Obama (1) or voting for the Republican (0) with undecideds being dropped from the analysis. This metric is preferred by the campaign for three reasons. First, it measures the state of the race at that moment in time without resorting to arbitrary rules for assigning undecideds. Second, the primary purpose of this experiment was to model persuadability from volunteer phone calls. Undecideds are inherently difficult to predict given standard voter file information, so their inclusion typically adds noise to a model rather than signal. Third, people who move from supporting your opponent to "undecided" are very likely to slide back to supporting your opponent by the time Election Day rolls around. Respondents will return to their circles of friends and media environments that generated the initial opposition and will naturally drift back to that opposition.

challenger – even a very prominent and experienced challenger (Jacobson 1990; Gerber 2004). On the other hand, the script used in the volunteer calls focused solely on Obama’s accomplishment and never mentioned the Republicans. Campaign messaging would also change a great deal if the most persuasive pitch was bringing people back into the Obama tent rather than attack and define Romney before he can define himself. For this reason, the vote choice results are split into three separate columns. The first examines whether the call increases support for Obama (1 = Obama; 0 = else). The second report whether the call decreased support for Romney (1 = Romney; 0 = else). The third column indicates whether the volunteer call shifted votes towards Obama and away from Romney (1 = Obama; 0 = Romney; Missing = Else). Table 1 reports each of the three variables in turn.¹¹

The volunteer calls moved vote choice in favor of Obama (see Table 2, column “Obama”). Only 38% of the control group planned to vote for Obama compared to 39.3% of the treatment group. This difference of 1.3 percentage points (s.e. = 0.7pp) is statistically significant and greater than the ultimate margin of victory in Florida. Once this intent-to-treat estimate is adjusted for the 38% contact rate, we estimate that completed volunteer phone calls increased the proportion voting for Obama by 3.5 percentage points (s.e. = 1.9, $p < 0.06$). While 3.5 percentage points is less than the 5 points estimated by Gerber et al. (2011) for TV ads during a gubernatorial primary, it is sizable shift for an incumbent President about whom opinions are relatively set and larger than the estimated effect for 100 TV ads (1.8pp, Sides, Vavreck, and Warshaw 2022, Table 3) or the effect of ads for Presidential candidates found in on-line tests (0.85pp, Hewitt et al. 2024, Table 2).

The effect sizes for the Romney vote were larger, despite the treatment script not talking about Republicans in general or Romney in particular (see Table 2, column “Romney”). 44.5% of the control

¹¹ A comparison of means test on experimental data is unbiased. Adding on modeling assumptions through the use of ordered logistic regression, which is justified through assumptions about the distribution of the variables rather than randomization (Freedman 2008), changes neither the magnitude nor the statistical significance of the results (see Appendix C).

group planned to vote for Romney compared to only 42.4% of the treatment group. The drop of 2.1 percentage points (s.e. = 0.7pp) was 50% larger than the 1.3 percentage point gain in vote share for Obama and suggests that support for challengers is less certain than support for the incumbent and more prone to changes. The experiment estimates that completed volunteer calls decreased support for Romney by 5.5 percentage points (s.e. = 1.9pp). While we can't be certain that all 54,649 completed volunteer calls did not attack Romney, it appears likely that a large portion of the people persuaded away were supporting Romney because of dissatisfaction with Obama and the call helped to address those concerns. Again, the experiment does not have the statistical power to definitively say that opinions about challengers are more malleable than opinions about incumbents, but the evidence is consistent with that hypothesis.

Given that the volunteer calls moved voters to support Obama and away from Romney, it is not surprising that the experiment estimates that the calls positively influenced two-way horse race – the primary outcome of interest for the campaign (see Table 2, column “Two-way”). Among the 82% of subjects expressing an opinion on the vote choice question, 48% of subjects in the treatment group supported Obama compared to 46% in the control group. This difference of 2 percentage points was statistically significant (s.e. = 0.8, $p < 0.02$) and substantively large given that the average margin of victory/defeat in these states was less than 7 points in the final election. The magnitude of the treatment effect is even more impressive once we account for the contact rate. The people who received the volunteer phone calls were 5.3 percentage points (s.e. = 2.1, $p < 0.02$) more likely to support Obama in the two-way horse race than they would have been otherwise. By any reasonable standard, phone calls from volunteers shifted voter sentiment towards Obama.

One possible effect of the volunteer phone calls is that they could energize targets to participate in the upcoming election. The campaign measured this possible outcome by looking at the percentage of subjects responding that they will definitely vote in the November general election (see Table 2,

column “Intent to Vote”).¹² In the treatment group, 88.3% of subjects said that they would “definitely vote”, which was 0.9 percentage points higher than the control group where 87.3% of respondents indicated that they would definitely vote. This jump in stated intent to vote approaches traditional thresholds for statistical significance (s.e. = 0.5, $p < 0.06$) and supports the notion that the call energized targets. Adjusting this intent-to-treat estimate for the contact rate, it appears that receiving the volunteer call boosted vote intent by 2.5 percentage points (s.e. = 1.3, $p < 0.06$). While this increase in intended participation is unlikely to have lasted through Election Day, it reassured the campaign that the call was not demobilizing.

Persistence

While changing opinion about the highest profile incumbent is impressive and the campaign required tasks for their army of volunteers to accomplish over the course of the year, the campaign was concerned that the shift in opinion was fleeting. The 48 – 120 hour lag between volunteer calls and the survey assured that the persuasive effect of the volunteer call lasted longer than the 2 day effect for television estimated by Gerber et al. (2011), but if the effect lasted only one week, the case for volunteer calls as a major campaign push would be much weaker.¹³ With this in mind a follow-up survey was conducted six weeks after the end of the experiment to measure the persistence of the persuasion.

Mindful of budget realities, the follow-up survey was conducted using interactive voice recording (IVR) technology (see Appendix B for the full script). After a brief introduction¹⁴, the

¹² This operationalization was agreed upon by the analytics and field staff in early planning memos. Looking at intent to vote as a five-point scale using an ordered logit does not change the substantive interpretation of the results and crosses traditional thresholds of statistical significance ($p < 0.04$, see Appendix C).

¹³ This persuasion experiment itself would still have value as data to help target “persuadable” voters.

¹⁴ The recorded voice was from a woman named Clare, a campaign volunteer from New York with a very soothing voice. Roughly a dozen voices were tested earlier in the campaign for automated calls, and Clare’s voice very consistently lead to the highest response rates and best quality of data (measured by respondent entered age and gender matching what was listed on the voter file). She generously agreed to lend her voice to most automated calls from the campaign.

respondent was asked to gauge their likelihood of voting in the general election, and then whether they would vote for Mitt Romney or Barack Obama if the election was held today. This dichotomous vote choice measure was the outcome of interest and similar to the two-way horse race measure used in the analysis of the first wave of the surveys. The campaign attempted to survey the 18,557 respondents from the first round of live surveys. Ultimately, 2,575 people responded to the survey; a response rate of 13%, which is very high for an IVR survey.

While the sample was balanced at the time of randomization and there appeared to be no differential response to the live survey, it is possible that treatment and control individuals differed in their willingness to answer the IVR survey. Looking across covariates (see Table 3) we see no evidence of differential attribution across treatment conditions on observable variables but cannot rule out the possibility that there was an unobservable bias in who answered the survey. That said, some subjects were clearly more likely to answer the survey than others. Compared to the original live survey conducted the week the treatment was attempted, the IVR respondents in the follow up survey are more likely to be female, partisan, voters, and older. Thus, while it does not appear the internal validity of the experiment has been compromised, the external validity of the persistence analysis may not apply to targets less likely to participate in automated surveys.

Table 3: Balance across treatment groups among IVR survey respondents

Group	Female	Age	Black	White	Democrat	Unaffiliated	Republican	Support Score	Turnout Score
Control	65%	66	6%	92%	37%	29%	35%	48	76
Treatment	66%	66	6%	92%	36%	28%	36%	48	76

One manifestation of this more limited sample is that contact rate among people who answered the IVR poll was 46% -- a full 8 percentage points higher than among the people who participated in the live survey. While it is not surprising that people who answer automated surveys are more likely to take calls from campaign volunteers, it means that we have to adjust the sample to ensure comparability of

the samples. The initial average treatment effect on the treated among people who later answered the IVR survey is 6.1 percentage points (s.e. = 4.2, see Table 4, column 2) compared to 5.3 percentage points among the full sample (s.e. = 2.1, see Table 4, column 1). While the difference is not statistically significant, it increases the denominator when we estimate the persistence of the treatment effect 6 – 10 weeks later.

Table 4: Persistence of Persuasion Effect

	Full Sample	IVR Respondents	6 Weeks	12 Weeks
Treatment	48.1%	49.5%	45.3%	45.5%
Control	46.0%	46.7%	43.0%	46.0%
Difference	0.021 (0.008)	0.028 (0.019)	0.023 (0.020)	-0.005 (0.017)
Contact	38%	46%	46%	42%
ATT	0.053 (0.021)	0.061 (0.042)	0.050 (0.043)	-0.012 (0.041)
Persistence			81% (0.31)	N.A.
N	15235	2529	2575	3354

Looking at the vote choice for subjects 6 – 10 weeks out from the attempted volunteer call, we see that 45.3% supported President Obama in the treatment group compared to 43% in the control condition (Table 3, column 3). That is, roughly two weeks after the campaign attempted contact, we observe an intent-to-treat effect of 2.3 percentage points (s.e.=2.0). Adjusting for the contact rate to estimate the effect on the people actually contacted, the follow-up estimates that completed calls increased vote choice for Obama by 5 percentage points (s.e. = 4.3). This estimate is not statistically significant, but it still provides an unbiased estimate that 81% of the initial boost in support for Obama from the phone call lasts 6 – 10 weeks out. If we calculate this downstream persistence using treatment assignment for opinion in the initial survey, this estimate of 81% persistence is highly significant (s.e. =

0.31, $p < 0.01$). Thus, the follow-up survey provides good evidence that the persuasive effect lasts much longer for volunteer phone calls than estimates of the effect for television ads.

To gauge whether the effect of the volunteer call persisted 12 – 16 weeks out, a second IVR survey was conducted June 1-9th. A random subset of 100,000 participants from the original subject pool were randomly sampled plus the 18,554 people who responded to the first wave of the survey. The response rate among the people who answered the first live survey was a robust 5% and roughly 2.5% among the 100,000 subjects who did not answer the first wave the survey for a total of 3,354 respondents. Once again, the survey pool was balanced across treatment and control conditions and observable covariates, so there is no reason to believe that either the treatment assignment or delivery was correlated with propensity to respond to the survey. However, this survey detected no treatment effect whatsoever. In every subpopulation analyzed, the control group was slightly less supportive of Obama than the treatment group. This difference never approached traditional thresholds for statistical significance, but strongly suggested that the persuasion effect detected in 12 – 16 weeks earlier and that persisted for 6 – 10 weeks had degraded to the point of being undetectable.

Discussion

Campaign fundraising in 2012 lagged behind the campaign's projections based on 2008 patterns. As a result, the Obama campaign had proposed substantial budget cuts across most facets of the campaign infrastructure. The field program was one of the areas that had been hit the hardest by the cuts and they were eager to participate in the experiment to help prove the value of the field program. The decision to participate in the experiment was extremely risky; a null finding could result in

further budget cuts.¹⁵ The results of the experiment confirmed the efficacy of the volunteer field program, so the campaign invested much more in the field program surpassing the original budget.

The campaign also used the results of the experiment to model the types of voters who appeared persuadable. Drawing on the enormous treasure trove of information the campaign and DNC maintained on voters, the analytics department found moderators that predicted people very responsive to volunteer outreach. The idea was to use the resulting persuadable model to target future outreach. Given the importance of this task, the model was validated several ways – the most obvious way was verifying that people with higher persuasion scores were more likely to answer “undecided” on the tracking polls. After validation and vetting, this persuasion score became the backbone of TV, digital, and field targeting.¹⁶

This experiment was conducted during the middle of the Republican primary, so it cannot really answer the critics who argue that persuasion is impossible (e.g., Kalla and Broockman 2018). While the experiment was conducted for the highest salience and most polarized office and demonstrated a persuasive effect that lasted for at least 6 – 10 weeks, these persuadable voters may have broken in predictable ways and “come home” when Election Day rolled around (Holbrook 1996). However, the volunteer experiment constitutes a strong refutation of Enos and Hersh’s (2015) claim that volunteers were likely ineffective campaign surrogates for Obama. It is undoubtedly true that volunteers were more liberal than the average Democrat, much less the average undecided voter. However, this experiment shows that these volunteers could be persuasive and advance the campaign’s objectives.

¹⁵ The importance of the outcome of the experiment caused the field team to be heavily involved in the design of the experiment. Getting complete buy-in on the research design was required so that they would accept the resulting estimates. The involvement of field team leadership greatly improved the design and execution of the experiment.

¹⁶ Large mail programs conducted their own persuasion experiments to model the persuadability for that particular flight of mail.

Whether the reason is that volunteers relied on campaign approved talking points or peer-to-peer conversations can overcome differences in ideology is open to interpretation.

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Appendix A: Sample volunteer call script

2012 Persuasion Script

CALL RESULT KEY

<u>NO PERSON PICKS UP</u>	<u>SOMEONE PICKS UP</u>
Not Home: Phone just rings Disconnected: Disconnected line Busy: Busy, fax or other tri tone signal	Call back: You are told the person on your list is not available Deceased: You are told the person on your list has passed away Language: The person you reach does not speak your language Wrong Number: You are told that the number is incorrect Refused: Someone picks up but does not answer our support question

Hi. Is _____ available? [ONCE THE PERSON ANSWERS THE PHONE] Hi _____. My name is _____ and I'm a fellow [STATE NAME] volunteering with Obama for America.

Q1. Have you thought about who you'll support in the election for President this year? [If Obama or Republicans, ask:] Are you 100% certain of that?

[If Definitely support Obama, check the box 1 - Support Obama] Great! President Obama took office in the middle of the biggest economic challenge our country has faced in decades. While there's more work to do, after three years of hard work, we're moving in the right direction and we've seen twenty-two consecutive months of private sector job creation. As you know, we need to re-elect President Obama so he can continue building an economy that restores economic security to the middle class, makes sure that hard work pays, and that everyone from Wall Street to Main Street plays by the same rules.

The first step in our grass roots campaign is focused on reconnecting with every member of the Obama family. It is people like us – working together, reaching out to others to grow the movement – that will re-elect Barack Obama as President.

Q2. Would you be willing to volunteer with the campaign?

[If Yes, check box] Great! Thank you for your commitment to our continuing movement. Someone from the campaign will be in touch about volunteer opportunities. Thanks for your time, and have a great day.

[If No, check box] Ok. Thank you for your commitment to the President. We will keep you posted on future opportunities to get involved. Thanks for your time, and have a great day.

[If Leaning Obama, Undecided, or Leaning Republican, check the box: 2 - Lean Obama/ 3 - Undecided/ 4 – Lean Republican] Okay, we're calling people like you to talk about the important economic issues facing the country. **(Engage using the talking points below while personalizing your story.)**

- The promise of this country has always been that if you work hard and play by the rules, you can provide a decent life for your family.
- But for decades, that promise of middle class security has been slipping away for too many Americans. Even as they worked harder, wages stagnated, health care costs soared and fewer employers offered retirement benefits. Good manufacturing jobs were shipped overseas and college tuition costs skyrocketed.
- And after a difficult decade, in late 2008, middle class families were devastated when their 401ks were wiped out on Wall Street, the value of their houses plummeted and millions of jobs disappeared overnight.
- This is what the President has been working to turnaround.
- Our opponents are clear about their vision for the country. They have proposed a new round of tax cuts for those at the top and deep cuts to education funding. They want to take away regulations that protect our air and water and outlaw abortion in all circumstances. And they want to turn Medicare and Social Security over to insurance companies and Wall Street banks.
- Instead of new ideas, they want to double down on the same ideas that got us into this mess.
- The President wants to build on the hard work of the past three years to restore security to the middle class. He wants to extend the tax cuts that benefit middle and working class families. He wants to make college more affordable and give people a chance to get trained for good paying jobs. He wants to continue to focus on small businesses and manufacturers so we can make things in this country to sell throughout the world. And he'll work to make sure that the Medicare and Social Security that people have worked for and earned is there for today's senior and tomorrow's.

[If Definitely supporting a Republican, check the box: 5 - Support Republican] Thank you for sharing your opinion with us. This year you'll have an opportunity to hear all the candidates debate the important economic issues facing this country. We hope you continue to listen to what the candidates have to say, watch the debates this fall, and give every candidate's views a fair chance. **(Use your best judgment about whether they are willing to engage in a polite conversation about jobs and the economy. If so, engage using the talking points while personalizing your story. If not, politely hang up.)**

[CLOSING] Thanks for taking the time to discuss these important issues facing our country. We hope you'll keep this conversation in mind next year and consider voting for President Obama. Have a great day.

Talking Points—Responses to Common Attacks

Unfortunately, when making persuasion calls, you may encounter people who have false beliefs about the President. We don't want people to think the campaign has no response to these misconceptions. If you hear someone say something false, you should respond with a short but polite comment using the talking points below.

- **Gun Rights:** The President believes, as do a majority of Americans, that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual right to bear arms and the courts have settled that as the law of land. No new gun restrictions have been passed under the President, and not one law-abiding American citizen has had a gun taken away by the federal government since Barack Obama became president.
- **Citizenship:** Barack Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii at Kapi'olani (kah pee oh lah nee) Maternity and Gynecological Hospital (Now called the Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women and Children) on August 4th, 1961. You can view two versions of his birth certificate ("long" and "short" form) at www.FactCheck.org and the birth announcement in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin at www.snopes.com.
- **Immigration:** The President recognizes that our current immigration system is broken and he is deeply committed to building a new 21st century immigration system that meets our nation's important economic and security needs. He's pushed for a system where everyone's accountable, a system where the federal government secures the border, employers who game the system and hire undocumented workers are held accountable and those who are here illegally pay taxes, follow the law, and get on the path to earning citizenship.
- **Bailouts:** TARP was proposed by the Bush administration and signed into law in October 2008 by President Bush, months before President Obama took office. Under President Obama banks have repaid 99% of TARP funds and any losses to taxpayers have been substantially reduced from initial estimates.
- **Taxes:** Under President Obama, income taxes for most Americans are at historically low levels. President Obama has signed dozens of tax cuts that give relief to the middle class and to small businesses.

Appendix B: Survey Instruments

Live Calls

Hello, I'm calling from [firm name]. May I speak with [name of voter specified]? [If unable to get the voter specified, terminate call.] I have just a few questions for you today that will take no more than a few minutes of your time.

1. If next year's election for President were held today, would you definitely vote, probably vote, is there a 50/50 chance you would vote, would you probably not vote or would you definitely not vote?
 - 1) Definitely vote
 - 2) Probably vote
 - 3) 50/50
 - 4) Probably not vote
 - 5) Definitely not vote
 - 6) Other, don't know, no response, refused DO NOT READ
2. If next year's election for President were held today, for whom would you vote [ROTATE: Democrat Barack Obama or the Republican candidate]? [If undecided/don't know/independent] Even though you say you are undecided/don't know/independent -- which way do you lean – Democrat Barack Obama, or the Republican nominee?
 - 1) Democrat Barack Obama
 - 2) Republican candidate
 - 3) Undecided/don't know/independent DO NOT READ
 - 4) Lean towards Barack Obama
 - 5) Lean towards Republican candidate
 - 6) Other candidate, refused DO NOT READ
3. If next year's election for President were held today, for whom would you vote [ROTATE: Democrat Barack Obama or Republican Mitt Romney]? [If undecided/don't know/independent] Even though you say you are undecided/don't know/independent -- which way do you lean – Democrat Barack Obama or Republican Mitt Romney?
 - 1) Democrat Barack Obama
 - 2) Republican candidate
 - 3) Undecided/don't know/independent DO NOT READ
 - 4) Lean towards Barack Obama
 - 5) Lean towards Republican candidate
 - 6) Other candidate, refused DO NOT READ
4. How favorable are your views towards Barack Obama?

- 1) Very Favorable
 - 2) Somewhat favorable
 - 3) Somewhat unfavorable
 - 4) Very Unfavorable
 - 5) Don't recognize, other, refused (DO NOT READ)
5. Do you APPROVE or DISAPPROVE of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as President? [PROBE: And is that STRONGLY (approve/disapprove) or SOMEWHAT (approve/disapprove)?]
1. Strongly Approve
 2. Somewhat Approve
 3. Somewhat Disapprove
 4. Strongly Disapprove
 5. Other, don't know, refused (DO NOT READ)
6. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Barack Obama has been effective as President? [PROBE: And is that STRONGLY (agree/disagree) or SOMEWHAT (agree/disagree)?]
1. Strongly Agree
 2. Somewhat Agree
 3. Somewhat Disagree
 4. Strongly Disagree
 5. Other, don't know, refused (DO NOT READ)
7. Regardless of how you are registered to vote, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else? [IF DEMOCRAT, ASK:] Would you call yourself a strong Democrat, or a not very strong Democrat? [IF REPUBLICAN, ASK:] Would you call yourself a strong Republican, or a not very strong Republican?
- 1) Democrat
 - 2) Not very strong Democrat
 - 3) Not very strong Republican
 - 4) Strong Republican
 - 5) Independent
 - 6) Undecided/Other/Refused (DO NOT READ)
8. For statistical purposes only, would you please tell me the year you were born? RECORD YEAR
9. Finally, in the past few days, have you received any contact from political campaigns?
- 1) Yes

- 2) No
- 3) Other, don't know, refused (DO NOT READ)

10. RECORD RESPONDENT GENDER

Automated Calls

Hi, this is Clare calling from DNC Services Corp with just a few questions for you today.

1. In November 2012 there will be an election for US President and other offices. How likely is it that you will vote in the in the 2012 Presidential election - will you definitely vote, probably vote, are the chances 50-50, will you probably not vote or definitely not vote? Press 1 if you will definitely vote. Press 2 if you will probably vote. Press 3 if there is a 50/50 chance you will vote. Press 4 if you will probably not vote. Press 5 if you will definitely not vote.

Definitely Vote1
 Probably Vote2
 50-503
 Probably Will Not Vote 4
 Definitely Not Vote 5

2. If the November 2012 presidential election were held tomorrow, would you vote for [ROTATE: Democrat Barack Obama/Republican Mitt Romney] or would you vote for [ROTATE: Republican Mitt Romney/Democrat Barack Obama]? Press 1 for Democrat Barack Obama. Press 2 for Republican Mitt Romney.

- 1) Democrat Barack Obama
- 2) Republican Mitt Romney

3. Thinking about the November 2008 presidential election, did you vote for [ROTATE: Democrat Barack Obama or Republican John McCain] in November 2008 or did you not vote in November 2008? Press 1 for Democrat Barack Obama. Press 2 for Republican John McCain. Press 3 if you did not vote.

- 1) Barack Obama
- 2) John McCain
- 3) Did not vote

4. Finally, and for statistical purposes only, would you please tell me your age?

5. For statistical purposes only, please enter your gender. Press 1 if you are a man and 2 if you are a woman.

Thanks for your time.

[Paid for by DNC Services Corp, 430 S Capitol ST SE, Washington, DC 20003, [telnum]. Not authorized by any candidate or candidate's committee.]