

November 2022

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Recommended Citation

Hunter, Jeff; Wintemute, Mike; and McLaughlin, Bryan (2022) "Campaigning During COVID-19: How Texas Republicans Navigated the 2020 Election," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 50: No. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol50/iss1/3>

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Campaigning During COVID-19: How Texas Republicans Navigated the 2020 Election

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions to political campaigns during the 2020 election. There was a stark contrast between how the two major parties approached campaigning during COVID-19, including the election in Texas, a deep red state that some thought might present opportunities for Democratic Party candidates. Using interviews with 13 campaign operatives, this study examines how Republican candidates in Texas navigated their campaigns in the context of a pandemic. Our results suggest the unique context of campaigning during COVID-19 gave Republicans key advantages over Democrats. Decisions to embrace a more organic, bottom-up approach led to more flexible campaign strategies. Democratic Party candidates followed the lead of Joe Biden's presidential campaign and mostly refrained from direct voter contact, like door knocking. Through experimentation, many Republican campaigns felt comfortable embracing a ground game and deployed complete field operations. Consultants argued this played an important role in helping Texas Republicans exceed expectations.

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Keywords: 2020 election; COVID-19; campaigns, field operations, Texas

Introduction

The COVID-19 virus was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and from there it spread rapidly across the globe (Koley and Dhole 2021). Worldwide, more than 120 million people were infected by March 2021 with more than 2.7 million deaths. In the United States alone, 34 million cases were documented, and 609,000 deaths occurred by July 2021 (Johns Hopkins 2020). By spring of 2021, the severity of the virus became known, and mitigation and control measures began to impact nearly every area of life. Almost immediately, international travel was suspended, shutdowns and stay-at-home orders caused economies to temporarily grind to a halt, and stock markets experienced severe downturns (Taylor 2020). As authorities focused attention on controlling the spread of the outbreak and developing effective vaccines, COVID-19 emerged as a major political flashpoint. In the United States, issues ranging from mask wearing to measures to boost the economy divided the country. All of this played out against the backdrop of state and federal elections, including the election for the U.S. presidency.

There were considerable questions about the safety of in-person elections in the United States and other countries and questions about whether elections should be postponed (James and Alihodzic 2020). Eventually, COVID-19 impacted election schedules in 78 countries, including the United States (Corasaniti and Saul 2020). From New York to Alaska, at least 16 states postponed primary elections from spring until summer in order to give additional time for election preparation (Corasaniti and Saul 2020). One of these states was Texas, where it became clear that the pandemic and the state's response to the pandemic in the way of shutdowns, mask mandates, and social distancing guidelines would significantly alter the traditional operation of political campaigns. This led Republican candidates in the state to modify their campaign strategies and tactics in important ways, which are worth examining for information about how campaigns should operate in an uncertain election environment.

Texas can be described as a politically conservative, Republican-majority state. In fact, Texas has not voted for a Democrat to a state-wide office since 1994. In addition, 23 of the 36 members of the current Texas delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives are Republicans, as are both of the state's U.S. Senators. Texas plays a unique role in national politics. In 2020, Texas controlled 38 electoral votes and maintained 36 Congressional seats, second only to California in terms of its influence on presidential elections and federal lawmaking (National Archives 2022; U. S. Congress 2022).

Despite this Republican dominance, in late 2019 and early 2020, before the COVID-19 outbreak reached the United States, many political pundits were

predicting that the 2020 election could be a turning point for Democrats in Texas (Samuels and Svitek 2020). Demographic shifts, a growing suburban and urban population, and tepid support among moderates for the Republican Party's standard bearer, Donald Trump, suggested that Democrats had an opportunity in state and federal races (Lomax 2020). This was supported by polling, which predicted Democratic gains across the state (Longman 2019). Further, Democrats believed Texas' large population of Hispanic voters could be the key to electoral success in 2020. Democrats understood that Hispanics represented the nation's largest minority voting group in 2020 and, thus, were critical to their efforts to elect more Democrats in Texas (Carolan 2020). If successful in Texas, Democrats could work to increase Hispanic turnout in other states where their votes could make a difference.

Based on the results of the November 2018 general election, Democrats concluded that in the 2020 elections, they could flip as many as 10 Congressional districts in which Republicans either lost support compared to 2016 or where their margin of victory was narrow (Svitek 2020). In nine of the 10 Democrat-targeted districts, Republican candidates lost support on a percentage basis in 2018 compared to the 2016 general election (Astudillo, 2020). These included Texas Congressional District 10, in which Republican incumbent Michael McCaul received 51.1% of the vote in 2018, down from 57.4% in 2016, and Texas Congressional District 31, in which Republican incumbent John Carter received 50.6% of the vote in 2018 compared to 58.4% in 2016. Texas Democrats hoped to build on their 2018 gains in 2020.

On November 3, 2020, however, Democrats were left in a state of disappointment. Instead of losing ground, Republicans successfully defended congressional districts that Democrats had hoped to flip and held ground in other state-level elections. While 2018 results led Democrats to believe they could flip their 10 targeted congressional seats in 2020, Republican candidates prevailed in all 10 races. In fact, Republicans gained support on a percentage basis between 2018 and 2020 in seven of the 10 targeted districts. For example, Republican Michael McCaul received 52.5% of the vote in 2020, an increase of 1.4% and Republican John Carter received 53.5% of the vote, an increase of 2.9% compared to 2018.

In an assessment of their loss, some pointed at the lack of a Democratic star on the ballot, a role filled by former congressman Beto O'Rourke in 2018 (Cai and Najmabadi 2020). O'Rourke certainly played a role in helping improve congressional Democrats' performance in 2018, but his absence from the 2020 ballot likely was not the only cause for Democrats underperforming expectations. In particular, the Texas Democratic Party concluded that their

campaigns' adjustments to COVID-19—or lack thereof—were a prime cause of their defeat (Cavanagh 2021). In response to the pandemic, Democrats chose to stop in-person, face-to-face campaigning, a key component in activating and turning out voters (Bailey 2020). Republicans, on the other hand, largely continued with these efforts by adjusting their strategies and tactics. In the end, this may have very well made the difference in their success. Given that liberal citizens were more likely to endorse and practice social distancing, it is unclear whether or not Democrats would have been more successful if they fully embraced a ground game. It is impossible to know how Democrats would have fared if they had adopted a different strategy. But we can learn lessons about what campaigning tactics are likely to be effective in a context in which traditional campaigning assumptions were upended by considering how Republicans campaigned in Texas.

This study seeks to learn more about the unique situation created by COVID-19 and the way Republicans in Texas chose to operate their campaigns in response. Republicans' success in Texas serves as a case study that highlights the potential benefits of engaging in a bottom-up campaign strategy. While our focus is on Republican campaigns, we also make some comparisons with Democratic Party campaigns during the same period, emphasizing the distinct approaches. Doing so provides an opportunity to examine the state of modern campaigns — specifically the effectiveness of face-to-face campaigning and different approaches to campaign decision making. Specifically, this case study will use interviews of Texas Republican campaign managers and campaign consultants from the 2020 general election to gain insights into what happened during the election and to discover what lessons were learned by Republicans campaigning during COVID-19.

Literature Review

There were a wide variety of political responses to the pandemic in the United States, with members of the Republican and Democratic parties often possessing differing views on issues like stay-at-home orders, social distancing guidelines, economic policy, and healthcare policy (de Bruin, Saw, and Goldman 2020). In addition, de Bruin, Saw, and Goldman (2020) explain that views about the 2020 election cycle were also polarized. While there was no question about whether the election would continue, there were questions about the feasibility and appropriateness of candidates conducting traditional political campaigns. The appropriateness and safety of events like rallies and face-to-face campaigning were open questions among those running campaigns.

The effectiveness of political campaigns on election outcomes is debated in the literature. Some studies suggest that campaigns have minimal effects and that other factors, like the state of the economy, play a more important role in determining the winner of elections than events that happen during or because of a campaign (Kalla and Brookman 2018). Yet others present evidence that campaigns do have an impact on voter behavior and the ultimate outcome of an election (Wlezien and Erikson 2001; Jacobson 2015). Jacobson (2015) writes about how research over the past few decades has severely undercut the idea that campaigns have minimal effects. Instead, Jacobson argues that evidence suggest campaigns matter a great deal, particularly in the areas of voter turnout and the vote choice of persuadable voters. Campaigns have also been shown to increase the public's general knowledge about politics and government, giving evidence that people are paying attention (Hansen and Pedersen 2014).

Political campaigns consist of many elements, among them fundraising, messaging, and field operations (Denton, Trent, and Friedenbergr 2020). Once a staple of political campaigns, mobilization efforts took a backseat to broadcasting mass messages through television in the mid and late 20th Century. With the advent of social media in the 21st century, however, political campaigns rediscovered the ground game (Kriess 2012; Vaccari 2010). The internet provided a cheap and efficient way for campaigns to coordinate local mobilization and engage in direct voter contact, which led to a renewed emphasis on the ground game (Bimber 2014; Howard 2006). Central to these efforts has been the establishment of local field offices, which allow campaigns to organize mobilization efforts, gather crucial data on potential voters, and adapt their messaging to local contexts (Darr and Levendusky 2014). Further, local offices allow campaigns to adapt to local contexts, as voters in different areas respond to different methods and messages (Hassell 2021; Wichlhouwer 2003). Scholars have consistently found evidence that local efforts on the ground are effective at increasing turnout (Darr and Levendusky 2014; Gerber and Green 2000; Masket 2009; Masket, Sides, and Vavreck 2016; Middleton and Green 2008; Sinclair, McConnell, and Michelson 2013). A meta-analysis by Green, McGrath and Aronow (2013) found that face-to-face canvassing added around 2.5 percentage points to a candidate's vote total. Further, there is evidence that candidates will fare best when they have a campaign manager that varies the methods and messages that are used based on what is happening on the ground (Alvarez, Hopkins, and Sinclair 2010).

Despite the increased emphasis on the ground game, local candidates still tend to tether their candidacies to what is going on at the national level rather than to issues that are most important to their constituents (Hijino and Ishima 2021).

They also sometimes emphasize issues that the national party is thought to own, but typically the primary focus is on issues that garner the most attention across the country (Pietryka 2012). Indeed, local candidates tend to be strongly bound to the national party (Wielhouwer 2003), as candidates often discuss a national policy and focus on critiquing or praising the president rather than focusing on local issues (Hijino and Ishima 2021).

The 2020 Election

This case study focuses specifically on field operations (i.e., door-to-door contact and other in-person voter contacts) and campaign strategy in Texas during the 2020 election campaign. In 2020, there was a stark contrast between how the two parties approached field operations. By August of 2020, Donald Trump's presidential campaign was knocking on 1 million doors per week, as opposed to the Biden campaign's door-knocking moratorium (Thompson 2020). Down-ballot Democratic Party candidates followed the lead of Joe Biden's presidential campaign and mostly refrained from direct voter contact, like door knocking, while Republican campaigns, which were not restricted by national party restrictions, continued with the practice (Khalid 2020). This contrast was evident in Texas, where Republican campaigns chose to continue direct voter contact and Democratic campaigns, taking the lead from their party's standard bearer, chose to eliminate it from their strategy citing public health (Svitek 2020). In a post-election interview, Texas Democratic Party Chairman Gilberto Hinojosa blamed the lack of a door-knocking campaign as a major reason why Joe Biden lost the state and the party failed to flip Republican-held seats in the House of Representatives (Ramirez 2020). In hindsight, Texas Republicans believe the freedom they had to make decisions to continue with their in-person contacts was politically advantageous.

Texas' Unique Political Situation

Given the unique context of the 2020 election, as well as the changing political landscape in Texas, we sought to gain insight into how Republican campaigns navigated these difficult circumstances. In doing so, we consider how the ground game and ties to national parties were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and what implications those strategy decisions may have had for the election results. Thus, we seek to shed light on what happened during a particularly interesting and important election in American politics, as well as develop insights into the importance and functionality of political ground games, more generally. Specifically, we ask:

RQ1: How did Republicans in Texas navigate campaigning during COVID-19?

RQ2: How did Republicans in Texas develop and employ their campaigning strategy during COVID-19?

RQ3: Why did Republicans outperform expectations in Texas during the 2020 election?

Methods

Data for this case study came from in-depth interviews conducted with 13 campaign managers and campaign consultants who served in leadership roles in Texas Republican political campaigns during the 2020 election cycle. This cycle is unique because it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Primary elections in Texas were held on March 3, with a runoff election initially scheduled for May. The runoff was rescheduled for July because of concerns related to COVID-19. Election Day was November 3. Interviews were conducted from October 2020 to December 2020.

This case study used purposeful sampling techniques (Koerber and McMichael 2008) to gather participants. Participants were recruited directly by the researchers through email and by phone. Because the universe from which the sample was selected is small—there are only a limited number of Republican political campaign consultants and campaign managers in the state at any one time—the sample itself was correspondingly small. Due to the sensitive nature of the work, some consultants and campaign managers contacted declined to participate in the study. Ultimately 13 people agreed to be interviewed—12 males and one female, all of whom were between the ages of 25 and 45. Twelve interviewees were white and one was Hispanic. In some ways this sample lacks diversity, however it was reflective of the overall universe of Republican campaign leadership in the state, which is largely white and male. There was a great deal of geographic diversity, which is important in regional politics and contributed to the results of this study. Those interviewed represented campaigns in different parts of the state from South Texas to the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex.

Interviewing experts is considered a standard method of qualitative research in many fields, including the social sciences (Bogner, Littig and Menz 2018). Expert interviews tap into the special knowledge possessed by those who have privileged access to information (Audenhove and Donders 2019; Bogner, Littig and Menz 2009; Bogner, Littig and Menz 2018). In this case study, campaign managers and consultants were considered experts because they acted as key decision makers in Republican political campaigns. Their specialized knowledge

of the campaigns' strategies and tactics provide information that might not be obtained elsewhere. Their expert views of the performance of Republican campaigns provides context to the campaigns' success at the polls.

Interviews were conducted by telephone or via Zoom. These were chosen because they best replicated in-person interviews, which was not possible because of distance and COVID-19 restrictions. After the purpose of study was explained to the participant and consent was obtained, a semi-structured interview protocol was used. While a pre-set list of questions were used, interview participants were allowed the freedom to discuss the things they thought were most important from their point of view. The interviewers also followed-up on interesting or unexpected topics. Before the interview ended, participants were given the opportunity to share any information they thought was important but was not covered in the previous conversation. Interview lasted from 30 minutes to one hour and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In this paper, quotations are presented with minimal alterations. Exceptions include the removal of filler words and some editing to render the spoken word to be grammatically correct. Whenever the participants mentioned identifying information, specifically the candidate they worked for, it was replaced with unidentifiable information in square brackets. Further, some quotations were edited for length and the removed information was replaced with an ellipsis.

An inductive method was used that aimed to extract both manifest and latent content meaning from the transcripts, identifying responses addressing our primary research questions. We then compared the transcripts to identify similarities and areas of overlap. Finally, through an iterative process, we grouped the responses under key themes. Much of the discussion centered on the mechanics of campaigning—particularly the ways campaigns usually reached voters and the limitations placed on them by COVID-19 restrictions. Among the most frequently mentioned aspects of campaigning was field operations, or face-to-face campaigning like door knocking and campaign events.

Results

Although we cannot directly assess the impact of Democrats' and Republicans' campaign choices on their performance in the 2020 election in Texas, our interviews provide important insight into what campaigning tactics are likely to be effective in a context in which traditional campaigning assumptions were upended. Based on our interviews, Republican operatives believe the unique context of campaigning during the COVID-19 election gave Republican candidates key advantages over Democrats. Interestingly, the lack of clear

guidance from President Trump proved to be advantageous to Republican campaigns in Texas, as they developed messaging at the local level, which led to more flexible campaign strategies. Through experimentation, many campaigns felt comfortable embracing a ground game, despite the context of the pandemic. Consultants felt that this played an important role in helping Republicans exceed expectations in Texas.

Bottom-Up Strategies

Donald Trump's influence and sway over Republican officials and candidates has been noted by political commentators (Peters 2020). Surprisingly, the campaign operatives we interviewed felt the response of President Trump and Texas Governor Greg Abbott to the COVID-19 pandemic left campaigns to navigate the situation on their own. As a consultant noted, "We were trying to set ourselves up as problem solvers...the best that we could, knowing that people were wanting some leadership there, and they didn't feel that it was being provided by the President and the Governor." Throughout the election, the lack of a consistent message from party leaders, particularly President Trump, frustrated many of those interviewed:

It helps if you can... sing from the same songbook. What was frustrating to me personally was that President Trump really... had a very tough time of sticking to a coherent message really, at all...through this entire campaign. So, we're getting kind of whipsawed by this. And that's unusual... usually you have some very clear boundaries of... what the top... three or four issues are going to be, or... on a statewide level, what the top three or four issues are going to be.

Another reason Republican campaigns in Texas did not tether their campaigns to the national party was that the general attitude of the Republican Party in 2020 was hands-off, allowing campaigns to make their own decisions about how to deal with COVID-19 and approach communicating with voters. The state party leadership, according to one consultant, never imposed their will on any individual campaign: "It wasn't this, 'you must do it this way.' It wasn't this mandate, it was, 'Here's what we need. Here's the timeframe, you have it. Go get it done as best fits your community.'" Reflecting on the flow of information from the Party, a consultant said, "From the Party itself, there was not solid guidance ever provided to us the severity or outlook of what was going on. That was stuff we had to glean from other sources."

Whether it was by design or not, this bottom-up strategy led to a more organic approach—one that proved advantageous to Republican candidates in Texas because it let them look toward the behaviors of the residents in each district for cues on how to behave:

The COVID stuff was less about political message and more about public health guidance. And of course in this district, you have urban... but then you have a lot of rural and so what might make sense in [the city] makes no sense in the middle of nowhere in West Texas, they're never shutting down out there, and they'll never really have a need to ever shut down out there unless they just have some crazy outbreak out of nowhere, which is really unlikely. So, we wanted to have messaging that worked everywhere, so we relied more on the expertise and the guidance of elected officials in these areas.

In general, those interviewed thought that this strategy of allowing campaigns to decide for themselves how to approach COVID-19 created maximum contrast between the parties. Some said they thought the Democrats' messaging on COVID-19 and their campaign methods did not really add up for many Texas voters. Republicans, they say, had the freedom to exploit this perceived weakness when it made sense:

I mean, it was not a good performance in my mind [for Democrats], and I think a lot of that comes down to Democrats' messaging not really adding up with what people wanted and what people believed in, which was, "This virus, yes, it's going to be serious and this is going to kill people, but we can't just shut down the economy and do permanent damage over it." I think that made a major impact.

In all, those interviewed said that while not having instructions from party leadership required them to take risks and make their own decisions, it was worth it because the independence let them tailor their behavior to their district.

Experimenting with the Ground Game

The arrival of COVID-19 in the United States corresponded with the beginning of the primary runoff and general election campaigns in Texas. According to those interviewed, most Republican campaigns initially paused one of the key parts of modern campaigning—face-to-face campaigning—in

March and April after the magnitude of the pandemic was fully understood. According to one consultant who worked with multiple Texas campaigns, campaign operatives were quick to respond to the development:

We got the stay at home orders, and that's when we started talking to some of our clients, and they said, "Yeah. I don't think we're going to be able to do this. With these orders, we're going to have to completely change our campaigns." We realized it was just going to be really tough.... I mean, a lot of them basically shut down their campaigns for a few months.

Republican campaigns, however, did not abandon their ground game strategies altogether. Instead, many of those interviewed described a process of constantly reevaluating the circumstances. One congressional campaign consultant described campaigning as a "zero sum game," and said, "You have to win or lose, and you've got to fight to win. So, you're going to figure out a way to keep the thing going. And that's what you really saw—a lot of ingenuity." This led some campaigns to consider the possibility of resuming face-to-face campaigning.

Another congressional campaign manager thought that voters were looking for conversation, and that even though "there was a little bit of apprehension" the decision to proceed was not difficult after a period of local experimentation. A consultant for a congressional race said that after the initial shock of COVID-19 in March, campaigns experimented with block walking to see what the public reaction would be: "We started block walking... and just tried it out, you know, you got to test it out and, and see what the kind of reaction that you're going to receive. And we didn't get a backlash. There were some people that were, you know, 'don't come to my door' or whatever, but, um, but not many. And it was well received."

Testing block-walking occurred in May and June, and many campaign operatives then felt confident that the ground game could be done safely and that voters would be receptive to it. A Republican campaign employee stated that "We would hang our literature on the door first. We'd knock and then step like 10 feet back, and so when folks opened their door we were far away. And I personally knocked a couple hundred doors, didn't get a single complaint."

Campaign operatives said that their campaigns exercised some caution when using field operations to reach voters. Many of those interviewed pointed out that their campaigns made a point to protect both their volunteers and voters:

We absolutely... put in protocols, you know, standing six to eight feet back wearing a mask at the door, only knocking, I'm

not using the doorbell, doing a just doing a door hanger, being very respectful of everyone's space. Walking individually, not carpooling, so there were a lot of protocols that we asked our folks to maintain safety throughout the process.

Overall, campaign operatives said that very little opposition to face-to-face campaigning was expressed by voters: "August 1st, all of our clients started block walking. Every one of them brings a mask. 95% of the people they see do not have a problem with them coming to the door. No one has been upset about it.... As a whole, people have been really receptive to them coming to the door." In fact, instead of opposition, campaign operatives said they generally felt people appreciated their presence. One consultant said, "To see what just pure block walking, door-to-door, meeting voters can do...we're reaching voters directly face to face. I think a lot of people are tired of the pandemic and tired of being cooped up...they're happy to see people at the door." Thus, by utilizing an organic, local strategy, candidates came to realize that they had permission to aggressively pursue a ground game.

The Ground Game Advantage

Face-to-face campaigning via field operations is considered to be one of the most important parts of modern campaigning. While Republican campaigns began embracing local mobilization efforts, Democratic candidates seemed constrained by a top-down adherence to the Democratic Party's decision not to conduct in-person contact. According to Republican campaign consultants, this gave their party an important advantage. One consultant for congressional campaigns in the state said that these field operations—and the lack of a ground-game for Democrats—were critical to his campaigns' success:

Fifteen years of experience I've had, and almost any political professional you talk to will tell you, "There's simply nothing more impactful, more meaningful, that's more of a game changer than door knocking." So, I think that voter contact piece was really significant... It's an unprecedented advantage when only one side's doing it.

As Republican's picked up the pace in the fall going door-to-door, Democrats kept to their decision to avoid face-to-face campaigning. Those interviewed said it made a difference, and made the overall effects of COVID-19 harder on Democrats than Republicans:

You have Republican campaigns going out there and still having a pretty active door-to-door canvassing operation, in addition to mail and TV and radio, whatever else they had, and Democrats essentially... unilaterally disarming on that... not doing it, because they felt like they had to kind of stick with the values of... not going door-to-door to people. So, in some ways, I think it hit the Democratic campaign operatives probably harder than it hit us.

The advantage was especially evident among swing voters. A campaign manager of a South Texas congressional campaign said that “the combination of Republicans hitting it hard again and the Democrats not, I think, creates a major impact on those unlikely voters or swing voters or lower turnout voters that get really impacted by having those interactions.” The Republican consultants and campaign managers interviewed said that not having in-person interaction likely hurt the Democrats chances in the election:

I would say by August, September, when things really started heating up... October for the general election, and Republicans started going door to door again, hosting in person events, and you saw all the Trump rallies and people showing up. Those things make an impact, and based on the numbers and the polling and the predictions and what people thought was going to come out of the election, I think what we saw was Democrats performed much less... They had much fewer victories and a much lower margin of victory in a lot of these races than they probably would have if they had committed themselves to going door to door and risking it and just saying, “Well, we need to do this for these campaigns.”

Another consultant who worked on state legislative campaigns said that the Republican advantage due to block walking was significant and that the outcome of some races could have been different if Democrats had also engaged in the ground game:

In a lot of ways, we’re still working, we’re still block walking, and they’re not. And I think that’s positive for us. You know, I keep wondering, because they’re obviously pouring a lot of money into these races, these Democratic races... but they’re not working. So, if we didn’t have a pandemic and they were block

walking, I'm not sure what things would look like. So, I think it's been a little advantageous for us that we're willing to walk, willing to knock doors.

Effective field operations, like door knocking, have long been a Republican advantage in Texas, according to those interviewed, because, as one consultant said, the Party understands that “campaigns can be won and lost purely on what you do door to door or person to person.” In fact, one consultant said that field operations might be the key to Republican’s success in the Texas over the past few decades: “I think one of the reasons why Republicans are so good at campaigning is because they focus so hard on the ground, in the field, in the person to person, and the events and the community aspect of it.”

Indeed, Republican campaigns’ use of face-to-face campaigning during the 2020 election followed the traditional pattern of previous campaigns, despite the unique and challenging circumstances. A campaign manager familiar with several Texas campaigns said that “as far as actual targeted operations, whether it was town halls or door knocking and stuff like that, most campaigns continued with business almost as usual on doing those things. They adjusted in a very limited manner, probably fewer town halls, but door knocking is the key to victory in a turnout election.”

One area where this may have made a specific difference was in South Texas along the Rio Grande Valley, where the population is largely Latino. Ocampo, Garcia-Rios, and Gutierrez (2021) suggest that mobilization efforts were a major driver in the turnout of Latino voters in the 2020 election. In interviews, consultants said campaigning using television and other media in South Texas is more difficult because the vast area that must be covered. Republicans chose to continue face-to-face campaigning, and it may have made a difference in an area that some thought would trend Democratic:

The [Rio Grande] Valley doesn't have good media options really for reaching voters... a lot of households don't even have internet. So, whenever our doorknockers were hitting doors... down in South Texas, it made a huge difference there. We saw massive gains in the Latino community as a result. Our strategy didn't change, theirs did change. That's really the impact. It wasn't so much us that were impacted, it was more their side that was.

How will this experience impact campaigning in the future? Those interviewed thought that their experiences campaigning during COVID-19 justified the general understanding of the importance of face-to-face interaction through

field operation. One said, “I think it’s going to actually reinforce traditional behavior where there’s even more of an emphasis on field, because that’s where we saw success. That’s where people are going to throw their money.”

Discussion

Despite optimism among many Democratic leaders, the Republican Party maintained a strong foothold in Texas after the 2020 election. Based on our interviews with 13 Republican campaign operatives, it appears the COVID-19 context uniquely benefitted local Republican candidates. They confirmed that some of the things campaigns traditionally do, like field operations, were vitally important. They also learned their Party leadership’s hands-off approach allowed for campaign independence, which was best suited for winning campaigns. As one consultant said, “Republicans are creatures of habit.” Had it not been for the pandemic, it is likely that the 2020 Republican campaigns in Texas would have continued unchanged from the campaigns before them. Instead, the 2020 campaigns put some old assumptions through rigorous tests, while potentially highlighting the importance of having a flexible, bottom-up campaigning approach during times of upheaval to the traditional election context.

Indeed, the 2020 election in Texas provided a natural experiment of sorts, where Republicans continued to use a ground game, but Democrats did not. Democrats and Republicans alike have traditionally relied on a mix of similar activities to communicate with voters, such as paid advertising, block walking, campaigns events, and Get Out the Vote efforts. COVID-19 changed this. The difference between the Republicans’ use of field operations, such as door knocking, and the Democrats’ abandonment of these tactics provided an interesting way of examining the usefulness of these strategies. In the opinion of the Republican operatives interviewed—and indeed the Texas Democratic Chairperson himself (Ramirez 2020)—field operations are a significant part of turning out voters.

Texas Republicans utilizing field operations may have very well been the difference between winning and losing in the races that were predicted to go towards Democrats. This supports what the literature says about the importance of a ground game in campaigning. Rarely have campaign field operations been put to the test in the way they were in the Texas 2020 campaign with one side embracing them and another fully abandoning them. This stark contrast provides evidence of their usefulness. Of course, there are a number of confounding variables and there was a lack of true control, so we cannot truly isolate the effect of the ground game. Nevertheless, the implications seem clear—Republicans in Texas benefitted immensely by having a ground game.

Further, the different approaches each party took toward controlling, or not controlling, campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic sheds some important light on the benefits of giving candidates the independence to run their campaigns in the way that best fits their voters. Those interviewed in this study were adamant that taking cues from the communities in their districts was key to framing both their messaging and, more importantly, their campaign strategy. Instead of decisions coming from the top down, Republicans in Texas let individual campaigns decide what was best for them. As we saw earlier, this allowed Republican campaigns in areas like South Texas—a predicted area of success for Democrats—to fill in the holes left by Democrats' abandonment of the ground game. For example, Republicans won the race for the Hispanic-majority 23rd Congressional District, which stretches from San Antonio to El Paso and is bordered by the Rio Grande. This district is, according to the campaign operatives interviewed, difficult to target with advertising because of its vastness. The Republican campaign took cues about campaigning during COVID-19 from its mostly rural population and deployed a field operation that ultimately pushed them over the top.

Republican operatives believed their strategy gave them a significant advantage over Democrats, but it may be the case that Democrats were simply more restricted in their strategic choices. Partisans respond differently to threats, as partisanship influence which potential dangers individuals feel anxious about (Albertson and Galdarian 2015). This is certainly true with COVID, where Democrats were significantly more likely to practice social distancing and other COVID-related health behaviors than Republicans (Clinton et al. 2021; Gadarian et al. 2021; Hsiehchen et al. 2020). President Trump and conservative media outlets consistently downplayed the severity of the virus (Gadarian et al. 2021) and conservatives likely experienced psychological motivations to see COVID as less threatening than liberals did (Conway et al. 2021). As a result, more conservative voters were more likely to embrace door-to-door campaigning. More liberal voters, on the other hand, may have reacted negatively to face-to-face campaigning. Thus, if Democrats had tried to implement an aggressive ground game, it may have caused a backlash among Democratic citizens.

The conditions were such that Republicans were more likely benefit from a ground game. However, it is still worth wondering if Democratic operatives' adherence to a top-down COVID strategy cost them an important opportunity to reach out to moderate and undecided voters—voters who may not have had such a strong aversion to face-to-face campaigning as more liberal citizens. In Texas, especially, where social norms and political views were less likely to encourage commitment to social distancing (Graham et al. 2020), understanding

the local conditions and reaching out more directly to swing voters may have provided a boost. Republicans, on the other hand, were not as restricted in their campaigning choices. This gave them an opportunity to better understand which strategies were effective in their local districts.

Rarely has a campaign season seen more disruption than the 2020 campaign season. The outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent responses to virus upended campaign plans and caused a reevaluation of tactics and strategies. This case study of Republican congressional campaigns in Texas examined how campaigns responded to the extreme circumstances created by COVID-19. It suggests that a flexible, bottom-up strategy can be of great advantage to campaigns during times of electoral uncertainty.

There are some limitations to this case study. First, this case study only focused on the perspectives of Republican campaign operatives. This was done as a matter of convenience and in an attempt to isolate the winning party's perspective on their own actions during the campaign. Information from Democratic campaign operatives could be a valuable addition and is an area that lends itself to future research. Further, this case study's reliance on campaign managers and consultants creates a decidedly internal view of the 2020 Republican election campaigns that could lack the perspective that external viewpoints might provide. Finally, some of the information gathered in this case study of Texas might not be fully generalizable to other states, as every state, Texas included, has a unique combination of demographics and political characteristics.

Conclusion

The 2020 election, which was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, started as an opportunity for Democrats to win elections in one of the reddest states, but ended with Republicans overperforming expectations. This case study is an attempt to understand how Republicans in Texas navigated the unique circumstances presented by the pandemic and how they deployed their campaign strategies. Interviews with 13 Republican campaign managers and consultants indicated that Republican campaigns depended on a bottom-up strategy that left decision making on issues like the ground game to each campaign. This flexibility led Republicans to first explore the best way to implement face to face campaigning and then launch full field operations. This case study helps us understand the campaign dynamics during COVID-19, and how those dynamics uniquely benefitted Republicans in Texas. It also sheds light on the importance of field operations to campaigning. Consistent with previous literature, this study reiterates the importance of an active ground game that responds to local contexts.

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