

**The Effects of Party Mobilization on Electoral Results. An Experimental Study  
of the 2011 Spanish Local Elections**

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**Paper prepared for the IPSA conference**

**July 2012**

# **The Effects of Party Mobilization on Electoral Results. An Experimental Study of the 2011 Spanish Local Elections**

## **Introduction**

There is a wave of enthusiasm advocating for the recovery of grassroots campaigning methods by political parties. The Obama 2008 campaign showed that modern campaigning can successfully combine highly personalized and targeted strategies based on grassroots mobilization, with the ‘modern’ impersonal and money-intensive methods. More recently, the French Socialist Party launched an unprecedented door-to-door canvassing campaign for François Hollande’s 2012 presidential bid. Part of this enthusiasm stems from the growing body of scholarship — particularly focusing on the UK and the US — that, using field experiments, indicates that face-to-face “get out the vote” strategies (in particular, *door-to-door canvassing*) have a considerable effect on voter turnout and on party choices (see, among others, Bochel and Denver, 1970, Bennion, 2005, Cardy, 2005, Green and Gerber, 2008, John and Brannan, 2008, Panagopoulos, 2009b). In contrast, more impersonal mobilization methods — such as automated or personal phone calls, mailing, leaflet and door-hanger delivery, etc. — are thought of as ineffective (but see Imai, 2005 for the opposite conclusion).

So far, the majority of the existing scholarship has focused on the US, with a few additional and recent pieces examining the British case (Gerber and Green, 1999, Gerber and Green, 2000, Nickerson, 2005, McNulty, 2005, Gerber and Green, 2005, Levine and Lopez, 2005, Nickerson et al., 2006, John and Brannan, 2006, John and Brannan, 2008, Fieldhouse et al., 2010). However, these are precisely the established

democracies where targeted personalized canvassing constituted a ‘traditional’ form of mobilizing the electorate in what is regarded by some as the ‘golden age’ of personalized and local grassroots campaigning (Beck and Heidemann, 2010). In fact, as early as the 1950s, the shared view was that the style of electoral canvassing common in the US, Britain and other English-speaking democracies was far less usual in most other established democracies (Eldersveld, 1956). And more recent work suggests that this is still true, as existing survey evidence shows that door-to-door (D2D) canvassing is much less frequent in countries such as Sweden or the Netherlands than in places like the US, Britain, Canada or New Zealand (Karp et al., 2008).

In the case of Spain, previous studies have shown that this type of campaigning is not very common either (Morales, 2010, Ramiro and Morales, 2004), and only occasionally employed in some small towns and villages for local elections. In fact, whenever Spanish politicians and campaign strategists are probed about the possibility of employing extensively grassroots canvassing for national campaigns, often their answer is that they are either not feasible or that they ‘don’t work’ in Spain. There is however no systematic evidence that this is indeed the case and it may well be that Spanish parties — and, for that matter, parties in other established democracies — have settled for suboptimal strategies of electoral campaigning as a result of the path dependencies of political campaigning and political organizations.

In view of this, we may wonder whether mobilization methods and strategies are, or would be, equally effective in political and electoral settings significantly different to those where the vast majority of evidence has been produced to date. How well do our

theories and assumptions about the impact of electoral canvassing travel to other contexts? Are electoral campaigning techniques that are regarded as ‘alien’ to the normal ways of doing in a given society less effective? In other words, does the political context mediate the effectiveness of different campaigning techniques? Or are political parties in some established democracies simply neglecting a potentially useful form of mobilizing the electorate?

This study addresses these questions with the results from a field experiment of partisan campaign mobilization by the Socialist party (PSOE) in Spain, a setting that differs substantially from English-speaking democracies in the ways of organizing electoral campaigns. As compared to US elections, Spanish elections focus much more on the political parties — rather than the individual candidates — and are much more centralized in terms of how they are designed and conducted. As compared to British or Australian elections, the organization of electoral districts as multimember constituencies and the inclusion of candidates in blocked party lists add to the centralized and party-controlled nature of campaigns — even in a context where the personalization of campaigns around party leaders or heads of lists has always been evident (Van Biezen and Hopkin, 2005, Rico, 2009).

The field experiment was conducted in the Spanish city of Murcia in the context of the local elections of May 2011. We assess the mobilization power of four campaign mobilization instruments that vary in the degree to which they entail personal contact, in how intrusive they are, and in how common they are in Spanish electoral campaigns: (a) mailbox leaflet delivery of policy proposals; (b) mailbox leaflet delivery of clinic appointments with the head of the list and candidate to become the

mayor—or, as labeled during the campaign, “coffee with the candidate”—; (c) face-to-face leaflet distribution on the street; and (d) D2D canvassing.

Given that in Spain personalized methods of electoral mobilization that are intensive in grassroots mobilization — especially D2D canvassing — are relatively uncommon and that there is a very widespread lack of interest in politics and of confidence in politicians (higher than in other comparable democracies), should we expect personalized methods to be equally effective than in the US and Britain?

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section we review the literature that discusses how electoral campaigning has evolved to become more professionalized and with fewer face-to-face interactions; and how and when are campaigns effective in mobilizing voters to turn out and vote for the party that requests their vote. We then present the context in which the experiment took place and its research design. The fourth section presents the results of the experiment. In the last section we discuss the findings and their implications for future research.

## **2. The Effectiveness of Campaigning Methods in Comparative Perspective**

### The Increasing Professionalization of Campaigning

There is widespread consensus in political science that electoral campaigning has been changing in established democracies considerably — gradually in some

scholars' view, dramatically according to others — in the past 30 years, and particularly since the 1990s (Kavanagh, 1995, Farrell, 1996, Holbrook, 1996, Farrell and Webb, 2000). There are many factors associated to this process of change (see Mair et al., 2004), but key among many others are the social and political changes (including party dealignment) that have led many parties to transform themselves from cadre or mass parties to catch-all parties — and, hence, their need to reach a wider sector of the population — as well as the expansion of television and other mass media (more recently new ICTs).

In parallel, political parties have been — in many established democracies — losing members in big numbers (Mair and van Biezen, 2001, Van Biezen et al., 2012), to the extent that many of them are becoming 'parties without members' (Scarrow, 2000).<sup>1</sup> These social changes, alongside strategic decisions by political parties, have gradually resulted in an ever increasing professionalization of electoral campaigning, which has tended to move away from personalized and face-to-face strategies of political mobilization and to privilege impersonal mobilization methods through mass media (especially, television ads) and generic electoral materials and publications (leaflets, letters, billboards, etc.). A trend towards a predominance of impersonal campaigning is, however, not contradictory with an increasingly targeted communication strategy that segments the electorate by age, region, ethnicity, etc., fostered by the greater professionalization of campaigning and technological innovations.

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<sup>1</sup> However, Scarrow warns against overblowing the impact of the decline in membership and questions that the 'golden' age of party membership was as widespread as many have suggested.

Thus, whereas in the ‘pre-modern’ era campaigns were mostly based on face-to-face interaction and local parties, in the last few decades electoral campaigns have been transformed to become mass-media centered events that are professionally run and managed (Norris, 2000: ch. 7), and increasingly centralized and marketing-oriented (Farrell, 2006). The shift is reflected in several aspects of the campaign process: the forms and methods of communication, the role of different strata of the party organization — central vs local — and the role of external agents — such as political advisors and political marketing companies. Some have identified these trends as reflecting a process of ‘Americanization’ of electoral campaigning that has extended to other polities, particularly western Europe (Swanson and Mancini, 1996), though the process is more often seen as an instance of campaign ‘cherry-picking’, where the selective adoption of certain techniques and forms of organizing campaigns may be seen as part of the parties’ strategies (Farrell, 2002). Indeed, Dalton et al. (2002) have shown that trends in voters’ involvement in campaign activities — such as attending political meetings, working for parties or candidates, or canvassing — are similarly downward in the US and in several European democracies.

Regarding the efficacy of campaigns, there is an abundant body of work suggesting that — contrary to prior beliefs — electoral campaigns actually do matter. As Holbrook (1996) and Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2002) summarize, the more widespread and traditional position around electoral campaigns in political science is that their effects are limited. From Gosnell’s (1927) work through Lazarsfeld and his colleagues’ seminal research (Berelson et al., 1954, Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), to more recent accounts of campaign effects (Schmitt-Beck, 2007), the most frequent conclusion is that campaigns serve to mobilize voters to go to the polls, but not so

much to persuade them into how to vote. The consensus, therefore, is that campaigns are indeed useful to activate voters and get out the vote, but it is less clear that they are able to persuade voters to change the direction of their vote. But how and when are they effective in achieving these goals, especially the activation goal?

### The Effectiveness of Electoral Campaigns

The effectiveness of electoral campaigns has been studied from three different perspectives that employ different methods of data collection and analysis. One first strand of research has focused on local studies that aimed at examining how and to what extent local mobilization efforts and organizational strength affected electoral results and success. Some initial studies, such as Krassa's (1988), pointed out to effects only on turnout and not on vote direction. However, other detailed case studies of local campaigns, such as those conducted by Denver and Hands (1997) have shown that the efforts put by local activists and organizations in the campaign are effective in getting out the vote and in improving the results of the concerned parties. These conclusions match those offered by Seyd and Whiteley (1992) who focus on the impact of party activism — as measured with membership surveys — on electoral success. An extension from these local case studies is the use of campaign spending data as a proxy for local campaigning efforts. The work by Pattie, Johnston and their colleagues (Johnston and Pattie, 2003, Johnston and Pattie, 1997, Pattie et al., 1994, Pattie et al., 1995, Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2008) has repeatedly shown that these efforts pay off and can make a difference to who wins and who loses, though the effects seem to vary for incumbents and challengers, with the latter gaining more from well-

designed local campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Górecki and Marsh (2012) further confirm the effect of campaign contact for the Irish case, even when taking into account the (endogenous) effect of geographical proximity between candidates and voters.

A second line of research employs survey evidence, and is much larger in scope, so we will not attempt to cover all of the existing scholarship. Suffice it to say, that research in this area developed rapidly from Wolfinger's (1963) initial study of the effects of party activism on a local referendum in New Haven, which combined a local study with survey data and showed how local party machines were effective in mobilizing voters in one direction or the other. Equally, Kramer's (1970) research on the effects of canvassing in the US with national survey data was pioneering in showing how doorstep efforts are effective in mobilizing turnout but not in influencing voters' choices. Later on, however, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) have disputed this common conclusion and have argued that canvassing and other forms of direct communication with the voter can actually be successful in persuading those voters who were anyway likely to turn out to change their vote choice. More recently, the burgeoning scholarship that combines large individual-level survey data with information on campaign activities and efforts, has led to a more sophisticated approach to the subject. Thus, for example, McClurg and Holbrook (2009) show not just how campaign activity has an effect on vote choice, but how its effect is related to the way campaigning shapes the impact of core variables that determine voting behavior (ideology, race, presidential approval, evaluations of the economy, etc.).

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<sup>2</sup> See also Carty and Eagles (1999).

Finally, a third set of evidence — and one that has very rapidly expanded — has assessed the effect of various campaigning methods and strategies with experimental methods. Pioneering experimental studies were conducted by Gosnell (1927) and Eldersveld (1956), while Bochel and Denver's (1970) work was the first of this kind in the UK and Europe. But it is since the early 2000s that experimental evidence has piled up in relation to this topic (for a summary see Michelson and Nickerson, 2011). For example, in numerous field experiments, Gerber, Green and colleagues (Gerber and Green, 2000, Green et al., 2003, Green and Gerber, 2008) demonstrate that mobilization methods that use personal and face-to-face interaction have substantial effects on voter turnout — sometimes up to a 10 per cent increase — and that they are far more effective than impersonal methods, such as telephone calls and direct mail (see also McNulty, 2005).<sup>3</sup> These experiments have been replicated in the UK in more recent times with similar findings (John and Brannan, 2006, John and Brannan, 2008, Fieldhouse et al., 2010).

In contrast to the abundance of field experiments with non-partisan messages, the number of field experiments conducted in the context of partisan campaigns is rather limited, and more so those that are 'embedded' in the real electoral campaign of a given party or candidate. As Nickerson et al. (2006) argue, there are several reasons why the effects of non-partisan and partisan GOTV campaigns might differ — though, eventually, they do not find substantial differences and neither does Panagopoulos (2009a). Non-partisan messages might be more effective because they focus on civic duty and capitalize on the altruism of the appeal. Partisan messages could, instead, be more effective because they are more targeted and they provide

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<sup>3</sup> But see Dale and Strauss (2009) on the effect of mobile phone text reminders on turnout rates.

more information. Paramount among the latter reasons, partisan campaigns try to persuade voters to support a candidate or party and in so doing provide information about their policy goals and positions, thus possibly contributing to increase the utility differential (Downs, 1957) between the competing candidates or parties.

Most of the few partisan GOTV field experiments that have been conducted tend to show that partisan grassroots campaigning serves to mobilize turnout but not to change opinions or vote direction (Nickerson, 2005, Alvarez et al., 2010).<sup>4</sup> Yet, Arceneaux (2007) suggests that partisan messages can change beliefs about candidates, Arceneaux and Kolodny (2009) show that mobilization affects issue preference and issue salience, and Barton et al. (2011) show that canvassing by the candidate had a large persuasive effect of increasing the support for the candidate irrespective of message. However, it is unclear whether impersonal methods — such as partisan direct mailing or door hangers — or those with very little interaction — such as phone calls from commercial phone banks — have this turnout boosting effect as well, as some studies have found no significant effect (Gerber et al., 2003, Cardy, 2005, McNulty, 2005, Panagopoulos, 2009a, Barton et al., 2011), while others report significant positive effects for door hangers and telephone calls (Nickerson et al., 2006). Some of these pieces of work also suggest that the effectiveness of the campaign contacts will vary depending on the target electorate, with boosts in turnout being more noticeable for less-habitual voters with an ideological leaning congruent with the partisan message, and with persuasion effects being more likely among undecided voters.

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<sup>4</sup> Cardy (2005) finds no turnout or persuasion effect for partisan mail and phone contacts.

In sum, the scholarly literature reviewed here — both coming from experimental studies and from other observational or survey studies — provides a rather nuanced picture about the effectiveness of partisan electoral campaigns and of the different methods of mobilizing and persuading voters. Campaigns generally matter, though their effects are much clearer in relation to mobilizing the vote and much less so in respect of persuading voters to change the direction of their vote. Equally, the body of experimental studies tends to suggest that campaign techniques that involve greater direct contact and interaction with the voters are more likely to mobilize them and (sometimes) to persuade them about whom to vote.

In view of this, and in relation to our case study of the Socialist party campaign in the local elections held in Murcia in May 2011, we formulate the following set of hypotheses that we set out to test with the results of the field experiment:

*H1: All mobilization strategies will be more effective in boosting turnout than in increasing the vote share for the Socialists.*

*H2: Face-to-face campaigning (canvassing and street leaflet distribution) will be effective both in mobilizing voter turnout (H2a), and in increasing the Socialist vote share (H2b).*

*H3: Face-to-face campaigning will be more effective in mobilizing voter turnout (H3a) and in increasing the Socialist vote share (H3b) than more impersonal campaign techniques (mailbox delivery of policy leaflets and of ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflets).*

*H4: Face-to-face campaigning will be more effective where previous turnout levels were lower (H4a) and where the Socialist vote was previously higher (H4b) [interaction hypotheses].*

### **3. Design of the field experiment and data**

#### Main Elements of the Organization of Elections in Spain

Local elections take place in Spain every four years in May. For most of the approximately 8,000 municipalities in the country, the constituency is the whole municipality, which is a single district, and the proportional D'Hondt formula is applied with a minimum threshold of 5 per cent to obtain a local councilor. For electoral administration purposes, voters and the territory are organized in electoral wards or census sections, which are coincident with the smallest unit of statistical aggregation for most public statistics (including the population census and the local register or *Padrón*). The electoral law establishes that the census section will have a minimum of 500 registered electors and a maximum of 2,000. Whenever a section goes beyond 2,000 it is partitioned and a new one is formed. The average census section in Spain is, however, between 1,500 and 1,700 depending on the size of the municipality.

In Spain, as a general rule, voters are automatically included in the electoral register when they register as residents of the municipality. Because registration in the local

register is required to access public health services and many other public services (schools, all sorts of certifications, etc.) almost all adult Spaniards are included in the electoral register.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there is good and updated information about the socio-demographic characteristics of the residents in all municipalities in Spain, collected at the same unit levels at which elections are organized (census sections).

One important limitation of the Spanish electoral register and of the electoral law (and its interpretation) is that researchers cannot access the information relating to whether the individual voted in past or the studied elections, as turnout information is protected by Spanish law as part of the ‘confidentiality of the vote’ constitutional protection. This means that the common strategy employed in the US and the UK of targeting a large number of individuals in one or several electoral wards and then checking who turned out and who abstained is not feasible in Spain. This is one of the main reasons why our field experiment design has focused on census sections as units of experimentation rather than on individuals.

### Research Design and Data Collection

Given that, in order to attract the support of a political party (in our case, the Socialist party, PSOE), we needed to implement a relatively low-cost field experiment — hence ruling out the possibility of running a pre- and post-electoral survey — and that we are not be able to learn about the voters’ individual turnout behavior through the

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<sup>5</sup> However, they might not be registered in the place where they effectively live if they have not bothered to update their registration to the new locality.

electoral register, we decided to randomize census sections.<sup>6</sup> Hence, our units of intervention and data collection and analysis are the census sections, and not the individuals, as this is the level of aggregation at which we obtain the electoral results.

We conducted the experimental intervention in the Spanish city of Murcia in the run-up period for the local elections of May 22, 2011. The location was chosen for opportunity reasons. Murcia is a city where the Socialists obtained roughly 30 per cent of the vote in the 2007 local elections (with a turnout rate of 66.5 per cent) and where they have been in opposition and with poor results — as compared to the Socialist national average — for quite some time. Murcia is a large metropolitan city and is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest in Spain with 441,345 inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> For the design of the experiment we used the information available from the local population registers as of January 1, 2010. At that moment, Murcia was partitioned in 346 sections, with an average population size of 1,276 inhabitants each.

Similarly to Nickerson et al. (2006), the choice of areas where the field experiment was to take place was determined by partisan mobilization priorities. We preselected the 138 census sections where the PSOE had obtained 30 per cent or more of the vote in the previous 2007 local elections (identified as ‘priority’ sections), which accounted for more than 52 per cent of the vote that the PSOE had obtained in 2007.

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<sup>6</sup>Arceneaux (2005) compares the results of an experiment when using individual-level and precinct-level information and shows that, when covariates are included, results are relatively similar.

<sup>7</sup> There are around 8,000 municipalities in Spain. Besides Madrid (3,273,049), only Barcelona (1,619,337), Valencia (809,267), Seville (704,198), Zaragoza (675,121), and Málaga (568,507) are larger than Murcia in terms of inhabitants. These figures are as of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2010 and as provided by the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE).

Of these, 112 census sections were eventually included in the experiments, and they were assigned as follows: 28 to the mailbox delivery of policy leaflets instrument, 32 to the mailbox delivery of ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflets, 26 to the street delivery instrument, and 26 to the D2D canvassing instrument.<sup>8</sup> Half of each of these groups were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of census sections by type of treatment (eventually done)

Type of treatment	Treatment	Control
Mailbox policy leaflets	14	14
Mailbox “coffee”	16	16
Street delivery	13	13
D2D	13	13
Non experimental		274

Before assigning sections to experimental and control groups, as recommended by Imai et al. (2009), we performed block pair matching prior to randomization, in order to improve the efficiency of our causal effect estimations. We used the 2007 PSOE vote share in the section as the block variable, distinguishing between low (less than or equal to the median value) and high (above the median value) Socialist vote share sections, with a cutoff point of 35 per cent.

The pair-matching within each of these two blocks was performed with blockTools in

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<sup>8</sup> This might seem a small number of cases for each experiment, but see Addonizio et al. (2007) for a comparable small-N field experiment on voter turnout.

R (Moore, November 2010) by minimizing the Mahalanobis multivariate distance for the following variables: total population, percentage of immigrants, percentage residents under 30 years-old, percentage turnout in 2007 and percentage of the PSOE vote in 2007. After pairing the sections, each unit within pairs was randomized into experimental and control groups. Table 2 examines the covariate balance between experimental and control sections for the variables employed in the pair matching. None of the differences in means is significant for  $p \leq 0.10$  (two-tailed). Hence, it is safe to assume that the pair-matching and the randomization procedures worked properly and did not introduce bias in the allocation of census sections to treatment groups on the covariates of interest.

Table 2. Covariate balance between treatment and control groups

		<b>Control</b>	<b>Treat.</b>	<b>P-value</b>
<b>Total population</b>	Mean	1424.8	1414.9	0.91
	Std. Deviation	463.4	424.2	
	Std. Error	61.9	56.7	
<b>Percentage of immigrants</b>	Mean	13.1	13.8	0.72
	Std. Deviation	8.7	9.1	
	Std. Error	1.2	1.2	
<b>Percentage under 30 yrs old</b>	Mean	19.9	19.9	0.86
	Std. Deviation	2.4	2.2	
	Std. Error	0.3	0.3	
<b>Percentage turnout in 2007 local elections</b>	Mean	66.7	66.8	0.96
	Std. Deviation	7.2	6.1	
	Std. Error	1.0	0.8	
<b>Percentage PSOE vote in 2007 local elections</b>	Mean	35.8	35.8	0.98
	Std. Deviation	6.6	6.6	

	<b>Control</b>	<b>Treat.</b>	<b>P-value</b>
Std. Error	0.9	0.9	

Once the sections were paired and randomized, each pair was assigned to one of the groups of campaigning instruments. As in Nickerson et al. (2006), this allocation was not randomized and followed practical constraints. We sought to minimize the ‘contamination’ produced by the street leaflet delivery by selecting into this group those pairs that would allow to maximize the geographical distance between the experimental section and control sections — to its own pair-matched section but also to other control sections for this campaigning method. We also sought to facilitate the successful campaigning in experimental sections by assigning the pairs with more territorially disperse and difficult to cover sections to the mailbox delivery group. Figure 1 shows the location of the selected census sections in a map.

The campaigning activities that required face-to-face interaction were conducted with party members and volunteers. Street delivery of leaflets took place in up to four rounds — though most census sections were exposed to three rounds of street leafleting — between March 25 and May 13, whereas D2D canvassing was done once in each section between May 9 and May 17, and the team researchers participated in the briefings to party activists in relation to both interventions and monitored their development.

For mailbox deliveries, the party organization subcontracted two professional companies, one for the mailing of the policy leaflets and the other for the mailing of the ‘coffee with the candidate’ announcements. The mailing of the policy leaflets took

place in two different rounds — with two different leaflets — aimed at all sections each time, one in late April and the other in mid-May; and similarly the ‘coffee with the candidate’ mailing was done twice, once between early March and early April and then again about one month later in each section between mid-April and mid-May. The team of researchers was able to see for themselves, on the ground, that the leaflets had indeed been delivered in the areas requested, though it was not possible to monitor all sections.

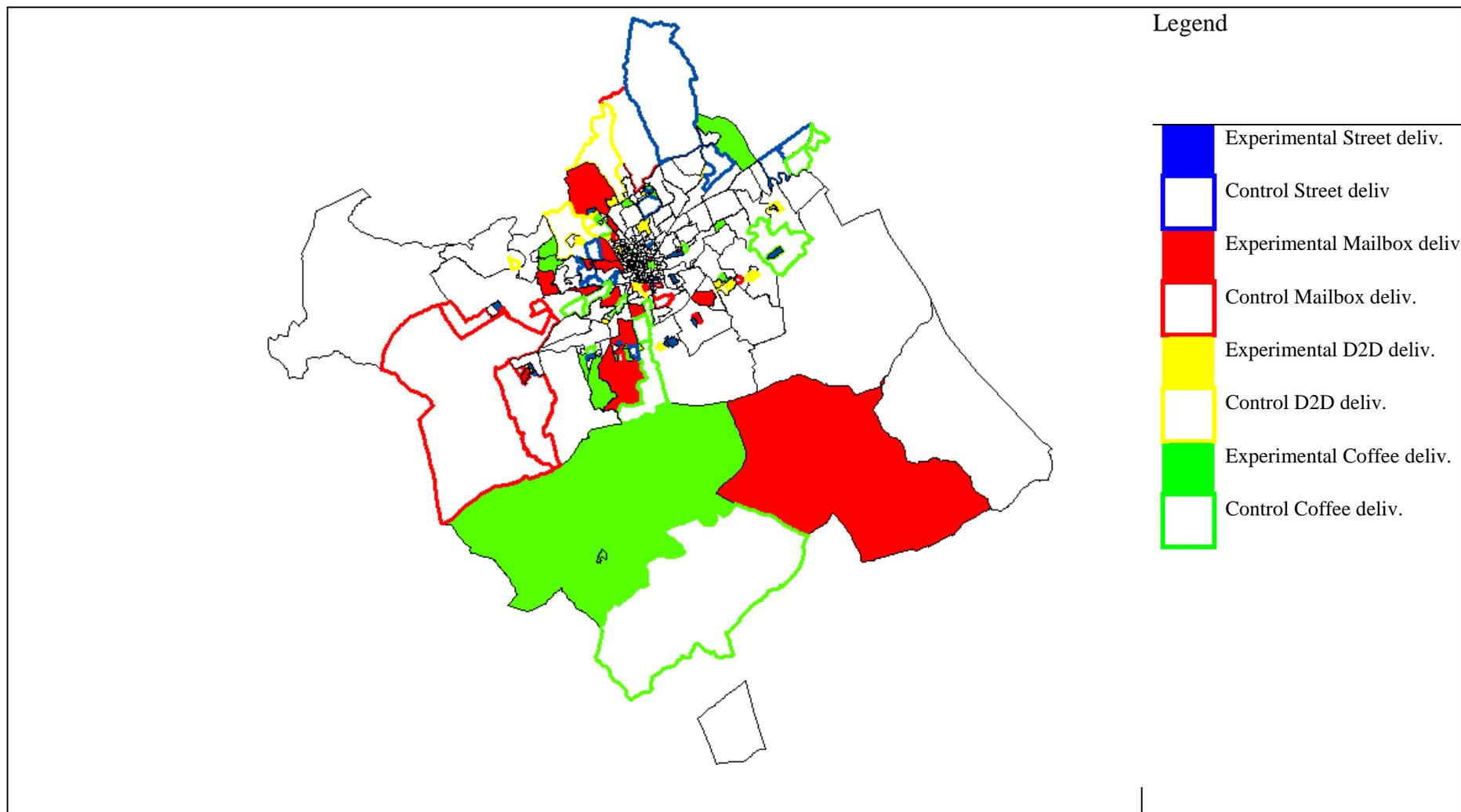
The leaflets distributed were designed by the local party campaign and emphasized policy proposals or presented the head of the list (the candidate to become the mayor). The policy leaflets were all a six-sides document of a similar style and design to the one included in the Appendix and covered six policy areas: quality of life, the economy, environmental policy, urban mobility and transportation, urban planning, and participation. The ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflet was a two-sides single leaflet with information on the location, date and time where the candidate would hold the clinic on one side, and with a letter on the other side.

The four campaigning instruments included some in which the Socialists would typically engage in every election (street delivery and mailbox policy leaflet delivery), one that is used only very sporadically and in a very limited number of areas (D2D canvassing), and one never used before (mailbox delivery of the ‘coffee with the candidate leaflet’). As this was the first time that the local party engaged in such a territorially targeted campaign, one of the researchers was allowed to be ‘embedded’ into the core campaign design team and helped shape the strategy for these campaigning instruments. The research team also provided the training documents for

canvassers and party volunteers, and participated in the briefing sessions with these. This close cooperation with the local party organization allowed a closer monitoring of the adequate execution of the various treatments in the right census sections, and that no 'compensation' actions were undertaken in the control sections.

Of course, as in most field experiments undertaken with a real membership organization, unexpected deviations from the original plans happened. The first mailing of the 'coffee with the candidate' leaflet was not distributed in two of the 16 treatment census sections due to a mistake in the distribution of leaflets to these two areas. The first round of mailbox deliveries of policy leaflets only reached 10 of the 14 treatment sections because the mailing company ran out of leaflets. Although all sections treated with street delivery of leaflets were going to be visited three times between late March and the elections, 6 of 13 received an additional visit because one of the programmed visits had resulted in too few leaflets delivered, usually because of bad weather. For D2D canvassing, the main problem encountered was that in two of the 15 sections allocated to this campaign instrument the local party organization was unable to get the job done. There were no major incidents in the implementation of the D2D canvassing in the ones where it was implemented, other than in one of them canvassers accidentally visiting addresses that were technically out of the perimeter of the census section.

Figure 1. The selection of the sections in the territory



Source: Cartographic information provided by the Spanish National Statistics Institute, as of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2010. Maps created with ArcMap 10.

Overall, the field experiment went reasonably well and according to the plans. However, it was clear that both party activists and professional mailing companies were not used to using map zoning for census sections — which are usually not ‘natural’ boundaries with which they are familiar. The one aspect that was not possible to achieve was an accurate record of the success of deliveries. Although we established protocols for recording the number of leaflets delivered and homes visited, the information received from the mailing companies and the canvassing teams was too incomplete to be of much use as a proxy of effective treatment. Hence, we can only analyze intent-to-treat (ITT) effects of the experiment.

Nevertheless, the information we have for some of the sections indicates that street leafleting reached, on average, around 200 individuals per visit (with a minimum of 60 and a maximum of 600), which is a low penetration rate if one considers that the average census section contains around 1,300 elector. In contrast, D2D canvassing and mailings were more productive on average, as around 300 households (one third of the average number of households per section) received a leaflet through canvassing, and an average of 70 per cent received the mailings.

The overall cost of the experiment — the four campaign instruments — was of approximately €9,000, which includes fundamentally printing costs and mailing costs. Party members and volunteers were eventually not remunerated for their leafleting or canvassing work, nor for their petrol/transport costs; and the venues where the ‘coffee with the candidate’ activities were organized were public spaces available for free for campaign events.

Further to the experimental treatments, the party engaged in other ‘normal’ campaign activities. The national headquarters organized a mass-mailing, in principle, to all registered voters with a letter from the national and local party leaders and the voting ballots. The local party sent additional mailings to the residents of 70 of the ‘priority’ sections, but these sections were carefully selected by the research team to ensure a balanced composition of treatment and control sections so that it would not interfere with the experiment. Other activities the local party organized included several types of small-scale meetings of the leading candidate with citizens and civil society representatives, party rallies, canvassing walks in marketplaces, and theatrical performance events with and without the candidate. We were able to collect information on the areas where these other activities took place and we included variables to control for their potential effects in our models.

#### **4. Results**

##### *Effects of the Experimental Interventions on Turnout*

The results in Table 3 suggest that the mobilization methods used by the PSOE in our field experiments are not fostering higher turnout rates. Indeed, we can see no discernible or significant impact on overall levels of voter turnout for any of the four campaign mobilization instruments, and the direction of the differences between treatment and control variables only go in the expected direction for the mailings of the ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflet. Of course, it could well be that these mobilization campaigns boosted the turnout of Socialist-leaning voters while

depressing the turnout of all other voters to equivalent degrees. However, this is not very likely, as none of the leaflets distributed were designed as negative campaign messages in relation to the contenders — even if they would include critical messages against the incumbent PP.

The ineffectiveness of the Socialist campaigning mobilization in increasing turnout levels is further corroborated by the multivariate analyses presented in Table 4. None of the experimental campaign methods increases turnout levels in the treatment census sections, and (if anything) mobilization would seem to depress turnout, though the large error terms imply that the effect is most likely nil. We do not find any evidence either that the effect of F2F campaigning is dependent on prior levels of turnout, as the interaction term is also not significant and close to zero.

Table 3. Percentage turnout per type of treatment

Type of treatment	Pair	Non-experimental or control	Treatment	N
<b>Policy leaflet mailbox delivery</b>	Average ANOVA: p-value=0.97 Paired samples t-test: p-value= 0.96	65.1	65.1	14 / 14
<b>Coffee leaflet mailbox delivery</b>	Average ANOVA: p-value=0.71 Paired samples t-test: p-value= 0.62	<b>66.1</b>	<b>67.0</b>	16 / 16
<b>Street canvassing</b>	Average ANOVA: p-value=0.96 Paired samples t-test: p-value= 0.95	66.3	66.1	13 / 13
<b>Door to door canvassing</b>	Average ANOVA: p-value=0.57 Paired samples t-test: p-value= 0.15	67.5	65.9	13 / 13

In bold, the results consistent with the expected direction of the effect.

All in all, these findings lend no support to all of our hypotheses —extracted from the US and British scholarship — about the effect of campaign mobilization on voter turnout. Hence, F2F campaigning (canvassing and street leaflet distribution) is not effective in increasing turnout (H2a), it is not more effective in mobilizing voter

turnout than mailings (H3a), and it is not more effective where previous turnout levels where lower (H4a). In short, F2F campaigning — or any experimental campaigning methods used by the PSOE — has no impact on turnout levels.

Table 4. Effects of the experimental interventions on turnout (OLS)

	<b>Model 1</b>			<b>Model 2</b>			<b>Model 3</b>		
	<b>Coef.</b>	<b>(s.e.)</b>		<b>Coef.</b>	<b>(s.e.)</b>		<b>Coef.</b>	<b>(s.e.)</b>	
Intercept	19.94	(3.80)	**	19.99	(3.76)	**	20.28	(4.10)	**
<i>Experiment variables</i>									
Mailbox – policy leaflets	-1.15	(1.11)							
Mailbox – coffee leaflets	-1.1	(1.92)							
Street delivery	-1.26	(1.08)							
Door to door	-1.64	(1.04)							
Any treatment				-1.17	(1.09)		-1.18	(1.10)	
Face to face treat. (vs mailbox treat.)				-0.29	(0.98)		-1.77	(7.98)	
F2F * % turnout 2007							0.02	(0.12)	
Days contact bfr election day	0.07	(0.06)		0.07	(0.04)	*	0.07	(0.04)	*
<i>Control variables</i>									
% immigrants	0.01	(0.04)		0.01	(0.04)		0.01	(0.04)	
% turnout 2007	0.76	(0.05)	**	0.76	(0.05)	**	0.76	(0.05)	**
% PSOE 2007	-0.12	(0.05)	**	-0.12	(0.05)	**	-0.12	(0.05)	**
<i>Other campaign activities by PSOE</i>									
Meeting w/ candidate	-1.39	(0.77)	*	-1.41	(0.76)	*	-1.42	(0.76)	*
Show w/ candidate	0.30	(0.67)		0.29	(0.66)		0.28	(0.66)	
Show without candidate	1.58	(1.65)		1.55	(1.63)		1.58	(1.64)	
Other meetings	0.07	(0.78)		0.07	(0.77)		0.07	(0.77)	
Markets walk	-1.08	(0.74)		-1.05	(0.73)		-1.06	(0.73)	
No. of cases	112			112			112		

Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.73	0.73	0.73
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Significance levels: \* p≤0.10 \*\* p≤0.05

### *Effects of the Experimental Interventions on the Socialist Vote*

We now analyze the effects of the different types of campaigning on the vote to the PSOE. Table 5 shows the results per type of treatment. The only treatment that seems to have a clear and positive effect on the Socialist vote is the mailbox delivery of policy leaflets with an average increase of nearly four percentage points in the vote to the party. For the mailbox delivery of ‘coffee with the candidate’ leaflets and for D2D canvassing, the difference in the average vote for control and treatment groups is almost inexistent, as we find as many pairs where a positive effect is found as pairs with a negative or no effect. For street delivery of policy leaflets there is some evidence that the effect might be negative but small, as treated sections had on average 2 per cent less of Socialist vote than control ones. This difference is not statistically significant when oneway ANOVA is employed, but becomes statistically significant at the 0.05 level when paired samples t-tests are run — the latter being more appropriate for our pair matching strategy.

Table 5. Percentage vote for PSOE per type of treatment

Type of treatment	Pair	Non-experimental or control	Treatment	N
<b>Policy leaflet mailbox delivery</b>	Average ANOVA: p-value=0.04 Paired samples t-test: p-value= 0.05	<b>20.45</b>	<b>24.29</b>	14 / 14
<b>Coffee leaflet mailbox delivery</b>	Average ANOVA: p-value=0.91 Paired samples t-test: p-value= 0.87	22.87	22.59	16 / 16
<b>Street canvassing</b>	Average ANOVA: p-value=0.28	24.03	21.80	13 / 13

	Paired samples t-test: p-value= 0.04			
<b>Door to door canvassing</b>	Average	24.67	24.31	13 / 13
	ANOVA: p-value=0.87			
	Paired samples t-test: p-value= 0.84			

See footnote for Table 3.

Thus, so far, the findings suggest that mobilization strategies perform differently in the Spanish context to what previously found in (mostly) English-speaking democracies. In the vast majority of past research, mailbox contacting was found to be ineffective, while door-to-door canvassing was systematically effective. Yet, there are a number of aspects that might interfere with our experimental interventions, as field experiments are never conducted in fully ‘controlled’ environments. Hence, we also assess the effects of our experimental treatments once a number of relevant covariates are introduced.

The results in Table 6 allow a proper examination of the hypotheses laid out in earlier sections with regard to the effects of different campaigning methods on the Socialist vote. Starting with the hypothesis that F2F campaigning — canvassing and street leaflet distribution — is effective in increasing the Socialist vote (H2b), the results in Model 1 suggest that this is not the case. Neither street delivery of leaflets nor D2D canvassing significantly (or substantially) increased the vote to the PSOE in experimental sections when compared to control sections. Instead, mailbox delivery of leaflets seems to be much more effective, increasing around 2 percentage points the Socialist vote — though the coefficient is significant only for the mailing of policy leaflets. Thus, at least in this context, F2F campaigning seems to be largely ineffective.

Table 6. Effects of the experimental interventions on the Socialist vote (OLS)

	<b>Model 1</b>			<b>Model 2</b>			<b>Model 3</b>		
	<b>Coef.</b>	<b>(s.e.)</b>		<b>Coef.</b>	<b>(s.e.)</b>		<b>Coef.</b>	<b>(s.e.)</b>	
Intercept	-10.3	(3.99)	**	-10.46	(3.97)	**	-9.24	(4.01)	**
<i><b>Experiment variables</b></i>									
Mailbox – policy leaflets	2.31	(1.16)	**	--			--		
Mailbox – coffee leaflets	2.43	(2.02)		--			--		
Street delivery	-0.45	(1.14)		--			--		
Door to door	0.74	(1.09)		--			--		
Any treatment	--			2.37	(1.15)	**	2.47	(1.14)	**
Face to face treat. (vs mailbox treat.)	--			-2.22	(1.03)	**	-9.04	(4.28)	**
F2F * %PSOE 2007	--			--			0.19	(0.11)	*
Days contact bfr election day	-0.12	(0.06)	*	-0.12	(0.04)	**	-0.12	(0.04)	**
<i><b>Control variables</b></i>									
% immigrants	0.10	(0.04)	**	0.10	(0.04)	**	0.09	(0.04)	**
% turnout 2007	0.14	(0.05)	**	0.14	(0.05)	**	0.15	(0.05)	**
% PSOE 2007	0.59	(0.05)	**	0.59	(0.05)	**	0.55	(0.06)	**
<i><b>Other campaign activities by PSOE</b></i>									
Meeting w/ candidate	2.11	(0.81)	**	2.17	(0.80)	**	2.27	(0.79)	**
Show w/ candidate	-0.16	(0.71)		-0.12	(0.69)		-0.09	(0.69)	
Show wo/ candidate	1.51	(1.73)		1.62	(1.72)		1.86	(1.71)	
Other meetings	3.20	(0.82)	**	3.18	(0.81)	**	3.35	(0.81)	**
Markets walk	0.83	(0.78)		0.76	(0.77)		0.58	(0.77)	
No. of cases	112			112			112		
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.66			0.66			0.67		

Significance levels: \* p≤0.10 \*\* p≤0.05

This is corroborated by the results in Model 2, which allow us to test H3b (F2F campaigning is more effective in increasing the Socialist vote than more impersonal campaign techniques). Indeed, the results clearly show that F2F methods are much less effective in mobilizing the Socialist vote than the two mailbox treatments and that their overall effect is negligible ( $2.37 - 2.22 = 0.15$ ). Yet, Model 3 indicates that the effectiveness of F2F campaigning is greater where the Socialist vote was previously higher (consistent with H4b), as the interaction term is positive. Thus, for example, in sections with 30 per cent of the vote for the PSOE in 2007, F2F treatments had a somewhat negative effect (-0.87), whereas in sections with 40 per cent of the vote, these treatments had a small but positive effect (1.03).

Moreover, even if our experiment was not designed to look specifically at this, our results clearly indicate that campaign contacts that took place more distant to election day had less of an impact than those closest to it, as each day reduces the effectiveness of the campaign intervention by between a tenth and a quarter of a percentage point.

Additionally, other factors are relevant in accounting for the Socialist vote in this subset of 112 census sections in the city of Murcia — where the PSOE obtained at least 30 per cent of the vote in 2007. Places where the Socialists did better in 2007 were more likely to see higher voting for the party in 2011, and as suggested by previous findings that lower turnout tends to damage the Socialists' prospects in Spain (Barreiro, 2002), the areas with turnout in 2007 are those where the PSOE tends to do

better. Also, census sections with higher percentages of immigrant population tend to see better results for the Socialists.<sup>9</sup>

When we conduct analyses equivalent to those included in Table 6 but predicting the vote to the main competitors of the PSOE — PP, IU and UPyD — we find that all of our four experimental interventions resulted in a decrease of the vote for these parties or in no effect. In some cases, this negative effect on the competitors' vote was statistically significant: D2D canvassing by the PSOE seems to reduce about 3 percentage points the PP vote, and mailbox delivery of policy leaflets and of 'coffee with the candidate' leaflets reduced around 2 percentage points each the vote to IU. These findings are both interesting and important, given that the way the mobilization strategies were designed, the party cannot target only their own voters within a given census section, and all voters are approached indistinctly.

In summary, our findings suggest that the effectiveness of various partisan campaigning methods in the studied Spanish context differs from those common in past American and British scholarship. F2F canvassing is not effective in mobilizing the vote for the party that undertakes it — in our case the PSOE — whereas campaigning methods that are usually thought of as quite ineffective — mailings — turn out to yield a modest but consistent and significant gain.

However, the few experiments conducted with partisan messages in the US tend to indicate that, rather than persuasion or vote direction change, the main effect of the

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<sup>9</sup> All these significant effects hold when we analyze the complete set of census sections of Murcia and not just the 112 included in our experiment.

campaigns stem from mobilizing the turnout of those already inclined to vote for the party in question. Yet, from the results presented on turnout, there is no reason to believe that the effect of campaign mailings on the Socialist vote found in our experiments is due to an increased turnout of the Socialist electorate, so we can only suspect that some process of persuasion must be operating among already mobilized or usual voters. Of course, without individual-level information, we can only speculate about the micro-mechanisms of these effects.

## **5. Conclusions**

The results of our field experiment in Murcia pose a serious challenge to the generalizability of our current beliefs about how campaign mobilization affects electoral outcomes, which are mainly based in findings that originated in the American and British context. The existing scholarship in Anglo democracies suggests that F2F mobilization tends to be effective in boosting turnout and mobilizing the targeted voters and that when parties engage in such resource-intensive activities it usually pays off. Equally, the existing consensus is that impersonal methods of campaigning are usually not very effective in getting through the campaign messages or enticing the electorate.

In Spain, personalized forms of campaigning tend to be low-key, not prevalent across the country (certainly not in the larger urban areas) and, when done at all, organized in an unsystematic way and without the capacity to target specific party-leaning voters. When compared to the overwhelming party campaigning literature from Anglo democracies, one could not help but wonder if Spanish parties were settling for

suboptimal campaign strategies when neglecting what seemed to be very effective ways of mobilizing voters in other countries. Yet, our results are in stark contrast with the received wisdom regarding the effectiveness of F2F mobilization in other democratic settings.

Our findings suggest that F2F contacts — although feasible, yet organizationally very demanding — probably are not cost-effective in terms of their electoral returns. There is no conclusive evidence that D2D canvassing increased the vote for the Socialists (although the coefficient was in the right direction suggesting that it ‘might’ have some very small effect), and there is clear evidence that street leaflet delivery has no impact. Even if the D2D canvassing seemed to, at least, significantly reduce the vote share of the main contender — the incumbent PP — by three percentage points the efforts that it requires is unlikely to be worth pursuing that goal if it does not result in a sizeable increase in the vote to the party incurring in the mobilization effort. In contrast, the mailing of leaflets — in our case, the policy-oriented ones — proved unexpectedly to be effective in increasing the Socialist vote, while also reducing the support to one of its other major contenders, IU. This result contradicts the more general assumption in the American scholarship that impersonal forms of campaigning are mostly innocuous.

Thus, most of the hypotheses extracted from the existing — mostly American and British — scholarship were rejected in our field experiment. Contrary to hypothesis 1, the mobilization strategies were not more effective in boosting turnout than in boosting the partisan vote (for the PSOE). Contrary to hypotheses 2a and 2b, F2F mobilization strategies were not effective in increasing turnout or in increasing the

Socialist vote share. Contrary to hypotheses 3a and 3b, F2F campaigning methods were not more effective than mailings in boosting turnout or the Socialist vote, quite the opposite. Finally, the only interaction effect we found in relation to previous outcomes, was that F2F seemed to be more effective where the Socialist vote was higher in previous election (consistent with H4b), as the effectiveness of F2F campaigning was not connected with prior turnout levels.

An additional important finding that has not been much emphasized in the existing literature (but see Gerber and Rogers, 2009, Nickerson, 2006, Nickerson, 2007, Panagopoulos, 2011) is that the timing of the contact to election day matters. Consistent with Nickerson's (2007) findings and in contrast to Panagopoulos' (2011) results, our experiment suggests that contacts that are more recent to election day are more effective. However, we find a boost in the Socialist vote share for more recent contacts but no effect on turnout rates. This lends support to Panagopoulos' claim that the effect of timing is complex and deserves further research.

The findings of this experiment need to be interpreted in relation to the impossibility of measuring effective treatment rates. Hence, in the absence of this information, our results only inform of ITT effects. Clearly, the consequence is that 'compliance' or 'penetration' rates vary substantially across types of treatment, and our suggestive evidence (and casual observation) indicates that these are much lower for the F2F campaign methods than for the mailings. This limits our capacity to make strong causal claims about the ineffectiveness of F2F methods in the Spanish context, but we are in a position to make claims about cost-effectiveness relative to realistic

penetration rates of each of these campaigning methods, which are the ones most likely to be of interest to party organizations.

A final observation that we wish to make is that, given our findings of very limited effectiveness of any of the campaign methods on voter turnout, our results cast some doubt on the claims that less personalized forms of campaigning might be causing turnout drops (Wattenberg, 2002). At least, we don't find any evidence in the Spanish case that this could be the case.

## APPENDIX: Campaign materials.

### Example of policy leaflet

**Murcia 100%**  
Pedro López  
candidato a la Alcaldía  
de Murcia

**con todos. com**

**Murcia 100%**  
Construyendo entre todos\* nuestro Modelo de Municipio.

**Hacia un Nuevo Modelo Económico y Productivo.**

\*Todos somos todos.

**Hacia un Nuevo Modelo Económico y Productivo.**

La situación de crisis económica actual ha incidido de manera especial en el Municipio de Murcia. Debido a la quiebra del sistema implantado por el PP, basado en la construcción y la especulación, un gran número de jóvenes abandonaron sus estudios y ahora tienen una baja cualificación profesional, lo que dificulta que encuentren trabajo.

El Ayuntamiento de Murcia debe fomentar el tejido industrial y los servicios contribuyendo a crear empleo. También debe colaborar con otras Administraciones y explorar nuevas posibilidades de empleo, fomentar la formación, la cultura empresarial y los sectores económicos alternativos.

### External side

**¿Cuáles son nuestras propuestas?**

- 1 Impulsaremos la Agencia de Desarrollo Local para aglutinar todas las políticas de empleo.
- 2 Crearemos la Mesa Local de Formación; aumentando la formación permanente, la enseñanza de las nuevas tecnologías y potenciando la cualificación del sector servicios y concediendo prioridad a los grupos de personas más desfavorecidos.
- 3 Fomentaremos la economía social en el municipio, centrada en el apoyo a los emprendedores y, especialmente, a las fórmulas cooperativas; dotando a los trabajadores autónomos de las estrategias y los recursos necesarios para su desarrollo empresarial.
- 4 Crearemos el Parque Tecnológico Aplicado de la Huerta de Murcia, donde se haga oír la voz de todos los agentes implicados y se pueda diseñar un futuro deseable para todos.
- 5 Crearemos la Denominación de Origen para los productos de la huerta.
- 6 Crearemos la Ciudad de la Otra Economía para impulsar actividades económicas experimentales más justas y solidarias.
- 7 Propondremos un Plan Local de Equipamiento Comercial para la ciudad de Murcia y sus áreas de desarrollo para ayudar al pequeño comercio y hacerlo más competitivo.
- 8 Activaremos Programas de Ayudas para la Recuperación del Patrimonio Edificado para que pueda ser reutilizado y reactivado.
- 9 Promoveremos la competitividad tanto de los sectores tradicionales como de los sectores emergentes, orientando con este objetivo la inversión local. Promoveremos los microcréditos de apoyo al tejido económico de nuestro Municipio.
- 10 Potenciaremos el sector turístico, revalorizando nuestros elementos patrimoniales y culturales.
- 11 Promoveremos la creación de empresas culturales y artísticas.
- 12 Apoyaremos a las Junior Empresas nacidas de la Universidad y de la Formación Profesional que permitan a los estudiantes introducirse en el mundo empresarial y les capacitan para el autoempleo.
- 13 Realizaremos un Programa de Innovación Local para que las empresas de Murcia se adapten a los cambios del mercado.

### Internal side

‘Coffee with the candidate’ leaflet

**31 de marzo**  
**17:00 h. /**  
**“Café con el candidato”**  
**Biblioteca de**  
**Cabezo de Torres**  
**Próximo “Café con el**  
**candidato”, 28 de abril a las**  
**17:00 h**

**Pedro**  
**López**  
**Candidato**  
**a la Alcaldía de Murcia**  
**Contamos todos\***

Murcia  
7-65

\* Todos, como todos

**Pedro**  
**López**  
**Candidato**  
**a la alcaldía de Murcia**  
**Contamos todos\***

En Murcia a 28 de febrero de 2011

**Estimado vecino:**

Mi nombre es Pedro López y presento mi candidatura a la alcaldía de Murcia en las próximas elecciones municipales del mes de mayo.

El motivo de lo presente no es otro que invitarte a tomar un café conmigo el próximo **jueves 31 de marzo**, a las 17:00 h en las instalaciones de la biblioteca del Cabezo de Torres. Por si no pudieras asistir este mes, **volveré el jueves 28 de abril**.

Una de las preocupaciones centrales de mi proyecto es fomentar abiertamente la participación de los ciudadanos en la gestión de la vida pública, porque nadie mejor que los habitantes de cada barrio, de cada pedanía, de cada asociación, para conocer de primera mano cuáles son sus necesidades.

La iniciativa que hemos denominado **“Café con el Candidato”**, brinda a los vecinos de los diferentes pedanías y barrios del municipio, la oportunidad de conversar en privado conmigo, de manera informal y relajada, sobre todas aquellas cuestiones que les preocupan.

Si otro particular, reiterándole una vez más mi interés por tu asistencia y recordándole que puedes contactar personalmente conmigo en el 661 432 001, y en la web [www.contamostodos.com](http://www.contamostodos.com)

Recibe un cordial saludo

Atentamente,  
**Pedro López Hernández.**

\* Todos, como todos

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