

**(Where) Do Campaigns Matter?
The Impact of National Party Convention Location**

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ABSTRACT: The quadrennial presidential nominating conventions are the biggest campaign events of the election cycle. Previous studies find that conventions significantly impact national-level candidate preferences; however, scholars have not yet specified the effects that such large campaign events have on residents of the host areas. As fairly uniform and one-sided interventions across years and parties, the conventions offer an opportunity for a cross-time, cross-sectional analysis of the local effect of campaign events. We develop a difference-in-difference analysis to show conventions significantly affect the presidential candidates' county-level vote shares. Individual-level data from panel surveys from before and after the 2000 and 2004 conventions are used to validate the aggregate-level findings. Beyond providing strong evidence of meaningful campaign event effects, the results demonstrate how campaign effects can be conditional on local political characteristics and geography. Overall, we find Democrats are more likely to gain support in convention host communities than Republicans.

Keywords: Presidential elections, nominating conventions, vote choice, turnout.

Presidential campaigns invest enormous time and effort staging local campaign events.¹ How much of an impact do these events have on voting behavior in the targeted areas? This has been a difficult question to answer. In competitive elections, effects are hard to discern because each campaign's effects may appear to cancel out each other (Gelman and King 1993). And even though scholars have identified significant and meaningful campaign event effects (Shaw 1999a), the validity of such findings is often uncertain due to the endogeneity stemming from candidates' strategic behaviors. As a consequence, political scientists continue to ask if and how much campaign events—and more generally campaigns—matter (Bafumi, Gelman and Park 2004, Brady, Johnston and Sides 2006, Wlezien and Erikson 2002). In this paper, we leverage the biggest presidential campaign events—nominating conventions—to analyze their effect on voting behavior. On top of a convention “bump” in national polling, do parties receive a separate and additional electoral advantage in the location the convention is held?

We focus on nominating conventions for three reasons. First, given that national media coverage benefits the candidates in national polls (Campbell, Cherry and Wink 1992), the intense local atmosphere created by thousands of attendees, millions of dollars in revenue, and intensified local media coverage should have an additional impact on local preferences and behavior (Shaw 1999b, 394) and therefore provide a good test of campaign event effects. Second, unlike other campaign events that vary in magnitude, purpose, and duration, conventions offer a relatively uniform intervention across years and parties in terms of size, purpose, and duration. Third, conventions are typically well-defined one-sided treatments which offer the leverage to determine their impact in near-isolation. For voters nationally, the two conventions come in quick succession so the experience is balanced over a short period. But for voters near the host site, there is—with few historical exceptions—only one convention in town.

However, political scientists conclude that nominating conventions produce no local effect and that “the location of the party conventions doesn’t matter” (Sides 2011). This conclusion is based on studies of state-level vote outcomes (Berry and Bickers 2012, Powell 2004).² But, while states are important electorally, state boundaries are not necessarily meaningful or appropriate to identify campaign effects.

Using states as units of analysis may mask convention effects for two reasons. First, there is no reason to expect that the heightened information flow emanating from a local convention would permeate equally throughout a state with multiple media markets and political ecosystems. Instead, effects are likely to diminish across greater distance. For voters in Miami, the effect of a presidential nominating convention four hours away in Tampa is likely to be greatly attenuated—Miami residents will receive the same national media exposure, but only a small fraction of the heightened local information flow Tampa area residents will receive. Also, there is no reason convention effects would not traverse state boundaries. A convention in Manhattan will more strongly affect voters in nearby New Jersey areas than voters further away in Buffalo.

Second, the effects of local conventions may be conditional on the exposed area’s political predispositions. A convention could activate and solidify the preferences of local voters who are predisposed to support the party, persuade some voters who would have otherwise voted for the other party, or create a backlash against the party with voters who firmly support the other party or who are too ideologically extreme—or moderate—for their party’s candidate. At the state-level, these effects may be too nuanced to discern.

With this in mind, we break with state-level analysis and—relying on county-level election results—use designated media markets (DMAs) to define where conventions might most affect local preferences and outcomes.³ At this more refined level, our results show that

conventions have a discernible and meaningful effect on the county-level vote located within the host DMAs, and that the direction and magnitude of this effect is contingent on the local area's political context. To buttress these aggregate findings, we employ Annenberg National Election Study panel surveys designed to track the effects of the 2000 and 2004 conventions on individual opinions with interviews immediately before and after each convention (Annenberg 2013).

Conventions and Convention Effects

Conventions once decided party platforms and presidential and vice-presidential nominees. Because of this, political scientists studied conventions to better understand intra-party coalition building, convention strategy, balloting, and delegate characteristics (Gamson 1962, Polsby 1960, Pomper 1963, Stone and Abramowitz 1983). Recently, political scientists focus more on behavioral effects outside of conventions because party reforms and television scripting severely limited the decisions made in the convention (Panagopoulos 2007b).

Scholars conclude that nominating conventions are highly consequential: national polls after conventions show candidates gain between five and twelve percentage points (Holbrook 1994, Campbell, et al. 1992, Panagopoulos 2007a, Stimson 2004, Shaw 1999b, Wlezien and Erikson 2002). However, there is disagreement about the mechanism driving this “bump.” Some point to persuasion stemming from news editorializing, information transmission, and exposure (Chaffee, Zhao and Leshner 1994, Cera and Weinschenk 2012, Morris and Francia 2010, Morris 2008) while others suggest conventions activate predispositions, so candidate preferences come in line with latent partisanship (Hillygus and Jackman 2003, see also Finkel 1993, Gelman and King 1993, Bartels 1992, Markus 1988, McClurg and Holbrook 2009, Iyengar and Petrocik 2000). Regardless of the mechanism, the effect of conventions is seen as “conditional on

previous preferences, partisan dispositions, and political context” (Hillygus and Jackman 2003).

Conventions require thousands of workers and overtake local hotels, restaurants, and transportation (Kale, Pentecost and Zlatevska 2010). Local voters will likely be exposed to extensive flows of campaign information through both first-hand encounters and social networks, as well as through local media accounts which are more extensive than national coverage alone (Pomper 2007, 195, Powell 2004). Database searches suggest that media outlets in the convention’s media market provide vastly more coverage than outlets outside of it, even if in the state. For example, in the year leading up to the 2012 RNC convention in Tampa Bay, the *Tampa Bay Times* ran four times as many stories on the convention as the in-state, but out-of-DMA, *Miami Herald*. Therefore, the effects stemming from this exposure are unlikely to be uniform across voters because exposure to a convention may be dependent on local partisan predispositions. Conventions may generate support among locals who agree with the candidate, but backlash among those predisposed to disagree with the candidate (perhaps because the candidate is in the opposing party, or the candidate is too moderate/extreme in the voter’s party.)

In addition to influencing preferences, conventions may affect turnout. The convention may raise the election’s local salience, and thereby motivate people to vote. However, the literature is in conflict on this point: some scholars show that campaign events positively affect turnout (Hill and McKee 2005, Jones 1998), others find the effects on turnout to be dwarfed by other factors or negligible (Herr 2002, Gerber, et al. 2009), while still others show that campaign activities only mobilize voters among particular groups (Gimpel, Kaufmann and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007, Holbrook and McClurg 2005). We expect the aggregate effect of conventions on local turnout to be contingent on local context and small.

Just as the study of campaign effects in general faces difficulty due to strategic campaign

behavior (Arceneaux 2010), studying local convention effects is challenged by strategic campaigns as well. First, parties may site their conventions in order to maximize votes in the local area. Second, parties may expend more (fewer) non-convention campaign resources near their opponent's convention location (their own convention location). We take steps to address these potential problems in our aggregate analyses, including a difference-in-differences approach. The over-time cross-section of counties in our analysis allows us to account for strategic factors and offers an improvement over previous efforts. Moreover, an analysis of individual-level panel survey data designed to study the effect of the conventions provides strong evidence that the effects estimated with the aggregate data are not spurious. The panel interviews are so closely spaced around the conventions, so it would be unlikely that strategic campaigning or other factors drive the observed effects.

It is important to explore the reasons parties might choose cities to host their conventions. Many in the media assume parties site conventions purely for electoral advantage (Cillizza 2008, Kornblut 2006). While presidential campaigns do geographically position events to maximize electoral impact (Bartels 1985, Shaw 1999b, Doherty 2007), conventions are not like other campaign events. Local gains are just one of many considerations in the convention siting process. Cities bid to host the conventions and siting committees visit cities before making decisions more than a year in advance (usually well before non-incumbent nominees are determined). Much of the siting decision turns on logistics—conventions require large television-friendly venues, hotel and transportation capacity, the provision of security and other resources by the host city, and local sponsorships (Wayne 2012, Smith and Nimmo 1991, 84, Davis 1983, Schouten 2008, Wrighton 2007). Other factors affect the decision including avoiding the Summer Olympics, avoiding the hometown of potential nominees (in case of a contested

nomination), personal relationships between the city and party leadership, and how well cities ‘woo’ siting committees (Davis 1983, Oreskes 1990a, Smith and Nimmo 1991). Beyond these non-political factors, national messaging may enter into siting decision. For example, even though George W. Bush would not be competitive in New York, the Republicans convened in Manhattan in 2004 to symbolize Bush’s post-9/11 anti-terrorism policies (Pomper 2007, 198).

The decision-making process and the diverse reasons for siting conventions constrain the choices available as well as the ability of parties to choose sites purely strategically for *local* electoral advantage. Therefore, with appropriate controls, it is possible to make reasonable inferences about the influence of conventions on local voting behavior—especially because we buttress the aggregate effects with panel survey data.

Hypotheses

Our primary interest is whether hosting a convention influences local voting behavior. Past research suggests the influence might be positive or negative, and this effect may stem from the previous partisanship of the host area. Therefore, in counties near a convention tilting in favor of the host party, the party should expect net gains in its aggregate vote. In counties where partisanship tilts in the opposite party’s favor, it should expect net losses. Therefore:

***Hypothesis 1:** The Democratic vote percentage changes as a function of exposure to either National Convention, and the direction of this effect is conditional on the partisan composition of the exposed electorate.*

Conventions could be expected to mobilize or demobilize potential voters. More specifically, and as a corollary to the logic behind Hypothesis 1, national conventions may entice participation of new and old party converts. By the same token, conventions may demobilize

members of the opposition and ideologically estranged copartisans. Therefore:

***Hypothesis 2:** Electoral turnout changes as a function of exposure to a National Convention, and the direction of this change is a function of the composition of the exposed electorate.*

Research Design and Empirical Models

We are interested in identifying local *changes* in voting stemming from hosting a convention. Past analyses of presidential nominating convention effects have relied on state-level data (Powell 2004, Berry and Bickers 2012), likely because state outcomes determine Electoral College votes. However, most states hosting conventions have localities with disparate political identities and – more importantly in terms of potential exposure to the effects of a convention – different media markets. Therefore, we measure voting and turnout with a finer-grained unit of analysis than states: county-level election outcomes from 1972 to 2012.⁴ We focus on these years because both parties use primaries as the nomination mechanism. Conventions in this period are general election spectacles rather than making pivotal decisions in presidential elections.

Our hypotheses posit that effects are the product of heightened *exposure* to conventions. We suspect that this heightened exposure—particularly from media coverage—is likely to be felt strongly within the DMA, but severely attenuated outside of it.⁵ Accordingly, our key explanatory variables (*viz.* being exposed the Democratic nominating convention or Republican nominating convention), are both dichotomous and set to 1 for each county in the DMA hosting the respective convention and zero for all other counties. Table 1 lists the convention city by party from 1972 to 2012.⁶

[Insert Table 1 about here]

As with all observational data, we cannot rule out the possibility of an unobserved cause of both convention site choice and any related changes in voting behavior. To better isolate the effects of the conventions from other factors we adopt a difference-in-differences approach (Card and Krueger 2000): we calculate each of our measures of voting (as well as our statistical controls) as the *change* between the prior and current election. This design allows us to distinguish the local effects of hosting a convention from background variation across both jurisdiction and time, thereby eliminating other factors that could interfere with our estimates.

We model the expected change in the Democratic vote percentage (*Democratic Vote Change*) in each county from the election at time $t-1$ to the election at time t as a linear function of exposure to either national convention, the interaction of this exposure and the previous Democratic vote percentage (*County Partisanship*) – allowing for potential non-linearities of the conditional effect by including an interaction with the squared measure of county partisanship – and a battery of similarly differenced demographic covariates expected to influence both vote margins and siting decisions.⁷ In addition to these controls, we also include a placebo control. *Placebo* cases are ideally similar in most ways to the treated units, but are known not to have received the treatment. We capture this idea using the well-known propensity score (Rosenbaum and Rubin 1985), which summarizes the probability that a county will host a National Convention as a function of relevant covariates (including the lagged Democratic vote margin, state and year fixed effects, a measure of population density and an indicator of whether the county has ever been exposed to a convention). The placebos account for the characteristics shared by regions typically hosting conventions that could confound our results. Finally, we include year fixed effects in order to control for election-specific effects.⁸

Our second analysis estimates changes in the county turnout rates from the prior election

in each county as a percentage of voting age persons (*Turnout Change*). This model is nearly identical to that of change in the Democratic vote percentage. In this analysis, however, we also control for the percentage change in county voting age population since the last election.⁹ Finally, and in order to account for the correlations of county voting behavior, both models calculate standard errors clustered by county. We provide descriptive statistics in the Online Appendix.

To validate the robustness of our aggregate findings, we analyze panel surveys from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Studies conducted before and after each year's conventions. Although the aggregate and survey models are not exactly the same (as we estimate models of the *probability* of reported intention to cast a vote for either party, and we use a slightly different set of controls, due to data availability in the survey), the results support our general claims derived from the aggregate models while leveraging better control-by-design.

Estimation Results

Table 2 reports the results associated with our model of the changes in the county-level Democratic vote share. The model fits the data extremely well, with an R^2 of 0.62, which is reduced to 0.55 when all convention-related covariates are dropped from the specification. Recall that the first hypothesized expectation is that the relationship between the Democratic vote share and exposure to a national convention is conditional on the exposed county's partisan environment, which we have operationalized using the county's Democratic vote share in the prior election (*County Partisanship*).¹⁰ Figure 1 depicts the *effects* (along with 90% confidence bands) of being exposed to the DNC (left panel) and the RNC (right panel) on the Democratic share of the county vote, as a function of the observed county partisanship across the x -axis.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Consistent with *Hypothesis 1*, the conditional effect of being exposed to a national convention is discernible for important portions of the county partisanship range, although the effects are stronger for exposure to a DNC. Both parties benefit from siting conventions where local partisanship favors them; these benefits increase as partisanship favors them more.

The left panel in Figure 1 shows that in Democratic counties there is a statistically discernible increase in support for the Democratic nominee of up to seven percentage points due to exposure to the Democratic convention. As one would expect, however, this activation effect is not linear, and the slope flattens as counties become more Democratic. The panel also shows that, although there is a large backlash effect in heavily Republican counties exposed to the DNC, there is room for persuasion in slightly Republican areas: the model predicts a discernible increase in Democratic vote percentages in exposed counties that lean slightly Republican (those counties slightly to the left of the vertical dashed line, with margins of less than 8 percentage points in favor of the GOP). As the data rug at the bottom of Figure 1 suggests, the number of counties that lean slightly Republican is not negligible. Consequently, Democrats would do best by siting their convention not just in “swing states,” but also in media markets with toss-up counties, where the convention could persuade voters in these areas in their favor; or in heavily Democratic counties (those with Democratic votes around 78%), where the convention brings the largest gains in vote share.

The right panel of Figure 1 shows a symmetrical and smaller activation-and-backlash effect of exposure to the RNC. For counties that strongly favor the GOP presidential nominee (i.e. with previous Democratic vote between 20% and 40%), exposure to the RNC increases the

host party's vote percentage by about 1 percentage point, whereas the opposite is true in counties that strongly favor the Democratic nominee (i.e. with previous Democratic vote between 65% and 82% for the Democratic nominee). No effect is discernible in toss-up counties.

Although barely discernible in Figure 1, there are non-linearities in the depicted effect for heavily Republican counties. An analysis restricted to more recent elections (starting in 1980) shows a backlash of higher vote share for the Democratic candidate resulting from exposure to the RNC in heavily *Republican* counties – an indication that, increasingly, voters in heavily Republican counties react negatively to the type of candidates being showcased in the GOP national conventions (no such backlash is observed for the Democratic Party in heavily Democratic counties).¹¹ As a result, the GOP is best off siting their convention in places that lean modestly in their favor, and do not lean too heavily in either direction.

A cursory comparison of the panels in Figure 1 shows that the estimates of the conditional effects from the DNC and the RNC are, for the most part, discernibly different from each other, and only intersect when the previous Democratic vote share was about 30%-36%. This difference further highlights the fact that the exposure effect is stronger for the DNC. The stronger conditional relationship for the DNC may be due to some characteristic of the parties that is beyond the scope of our theory. However, a regular difference in the nominees suggests one possible explanation for the muted RNC effects: voters were far less likely to get “new” information from the RNC. In six of the eleven elections in our dataset, the RNC nominated a sitting President or Vice President plus four more nominees who had previously run prominent campaigns for the Republican nomination. Only George W. Bush, the eponymous son of a recent former Republican President, had not run previous national campaign when nominated in 2000. In contrast, only three of the eleven DNCs nominated a sitting President or Vice President and

one nominated a former Vice President.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Table 3 reports the relationship between turnout and being exposed to a presidential nominating convention in a DMA. The model's fit is not as good than that of vote outcomes (with an R^2 of 0.47), and we fail to find much evidence supporting *Hypothesis 2's* expectation that conventions conditionally affect turnout. More specifically, the effects of exposure to either the DNC or the RNC are not statistically discernible for almost all levels of county partisanship, with an important exception: the DNC appears to have a demobilizing effect amongst voters in Republican counties, where turnout can decrease by as much as 3 percentage points when exposed to the DNC. This can be seen in the two panels of Figure 2, which depicts the effects of exposure on change in turnout, conditional on county partisanship across the x -axis.

Furthermore, when the estimated effects on turnout *are* statistically discernible, they are too small to account for the magnitude of the effects on vote percentages. For example, even assuming all of the voters demobilized by the DNC in heavily Republican counties voted for the Democrat (the only range with significant change in turnout) this would only account for about half of the reduction in Democratic vote share seen in these counties in Figure 1.

We now employ panel survey data from the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Studies, which provide suitable data from interviews shortly before and shortly after the four conventions. In combination with our aggregate analyses, the survey data develops a more compelling case for convention effects than either analysis would support on its own: the aggregate data establishes the size of the effect across the modern presidential campaign period, while the survey data analysis allows us to eliminate other mechanisms that may drive the results

seen in the aggregate analysis. The panel design enables us to validate our inference from the aggregate analyses that the effects on vote margin are due to activation and persuasion rather than mobilization and the re-interviews eliminate other strategic campaign activity that could affect our results, as they take place quickly after the conventions are held.¹²

Unfortunately, there is not enough variation in the respondents' reported intentions to turn out to evaluate Hypothesis 2, possibly due to the likelihood of over-reporting vote intention in surveys (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012). Therefore, we focus on Hypothesis 1's expectation that vote choice in a convention host media market will be more affected by the convention than outside of the host area, and that these effects will be conditional on the exposed voter's predispositions towards the hosting party. We model each respondent's post-convention probability of having an intention to vote for the convening party's candidate as a function of whether or not she resides in the convention location's media market, her pre-convention vote intention, and a battery of demographic controls.¹³ Table 4 presents the results of estimating a Probit model of the reported intention to vote for the hosting party.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

The relationships between exposure to a local convention and probability of reporting a given candidate preference support both the theoretical expectation of *Hypothesis 1* and the evidence provided by the aggregate level analysis. The effects we identify using the survey data are particularly notable because they take place over and above the backdrop of national effects. Among respondents who didn't already support the Democratic candidate, being exposed to a local Democratic convention *increases* the respondent's propensity to support the Democratic candidate by 6.7 percentage points on average for respondents in the convention DMA. Among respondents who did not already support the Republican candidate, exposure to a local

Republican convention *decreases* the respondent's propensity to support the Republican candidate by 8.7 percentage points on average for respondents in the convention DMA.

Figure 3 displays kernel density approximations of these treatment effects across voter predispositions, obtained by calculating the treatment effect (i.e. difference in probability of supporting the hosting party after the convention under the observed and the counterfactual treatment regimes) for each survey respondent exposed to a convention.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Survey respondents in the DMA of the DNC (left panel of Figure 3) were more likely to report support for the Democratic candidate in the post-convention wave of the panel survey. This relationship is stronger among respondents who reported affiliation with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party in the pre-convention wave. Figure 3 suggests the net effect of the DNC on Republican affiliated voters is slightly more positive than the net effect in Republican counties in Figure 1. However, this may be due to incongruity between looking at individual reported affiliation rather than aggregate past county-level vote share or looking at only the 2000 and 2004 conventions with individual data. The important point is that the patterns are consistent: local exposure to the DNC moves a broad range of voters towards supporting the Democratic nominee and this relationship is stronger among voters with an indication of being pre-disposed to vote for Democrats.

Survey respondents exposed to the RNC (right panel of Figure 3) are slightly less likely to report support for the Republican candidate. The absolute value of this shift is smaller than for the DNC. The distribution is narrower for respondents who reported a Republican affiliation in the pre-convention wave, indicating a smaller net shift than for respondents who reported a Democratic affiliation in the pre-convention wave. Figure 3 suggests the effect from the 2000

and 2004 RNCs on Republicans are slightly more negative than in Republican counties in Figure 1. As above, this may be due to incongruity between reported partisanship and aggregate votes or a consequence of these two conventions. The slight net negative relationship among Republican affiliates in Figure 3 is consistent with the backlash from the RNC noted in heavily Republican counties in elections since 1980 in the discussion of Figure 1 above. Most importantly, in both the individual and aggregate data the effects of the RNC are more muted and less favorable to the Republican nominee.

The panels in Figure 3 also support the idea that the conditionality of these effects is most noticeable in the case of the DNC. For the RNC, there is near complete overlap of densities for different types of voters. For the DNC, the densities for each party are relatively separated. This pattern is consistent with the stronger conditional relationship for the DNC in Figure 1.

Drawing upon additional data from the survey study suggests having a convention nearby raises interest and attention to the convention compared to people residing outside of the host area. Respondents living near the convention site makes respondents are more likely to report having watched some of the convention, although living near the convention site does not appear related to overall news consumption or political discussion. The reported increase in attention to the convention is consistent with our expectation about the mechanism through which conventions affect vote outcomes: respondents are paying attention to the nearby *event* even if they are not paying attention to the broader political process of which the event is a part.

Discussion

The results of our analyses of county-level data suggest that parties will enjoy, or endure, *local* consequences to their convention siting decisions. What are the potential electoral impacts

of these decisions? Figure 4 shows the estimated effect densities of exposing each county in the U.S. to the DNC (left panel) or to the RNC (right panel) on the expected change in Democratic vote share during the 2012 election. These calculations do not capture the dynamic complexity of presidential campaigns, but they provide a useful illustration of the potential for conventions to impact elections. For exposure to a local DNC (left hand panel), the positive central tendency of the density distribution indicates that Democrats are likely to gain sizeable amounts of votes in most counties (with a median increase in Democratic vote share of 1.1 percentage points, and a maximum of 7.14) through local exposure to their convention. The left-skew indicates that a few counties tilt Republican enough to result in large decreases in Democratic vote shares (few of these are in metropolitan areas that might actually host conventions). On the right hand panel, the slight right-skew of the RNC density distribution indicates the GOP will lose votes (i.e. will prompt increases in Democratic vote shares) in a few heavily Democratic counties and that, on average, effects in favor of the GOP are relatively small (with a median increase in GOP vote share of about 0.67 percentage points, and a maximum gain of 3).

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

On the most Republican end of the spectrum, King County, TX, voted over 87 percent for McCain in 2008. According to our estimates, it would be the worst county to expose to the DNC for the Democrats—doing so would have resulted in a predicted decrease of over roughly 10 percentage points in the 2012 Democratic vote share. However, the GOP would only have gained about 3 percentage points by exposing King, TX to the 2012 RNC. On the other end, San Francisco, CA, voted 84 percent for Obama in 2008. Exposing voters in San Francisco to the DNC would have driven up change in the Democratic nominee’s vote share by about 7 percentage points. By our estimates, the GOP would have lost about 4 percentage points had they

held their convention in the San Francisco area.

Given that presidential campaigns are fought and won on a state-by-state basis, we also used our models to estimate the potential impact in terms of winning (or losing) states throughout the 1972-2012 period as a result of convention siting decisions.¹⁴ Even examining just the set of DMAs that actually hosted a convention sometime during this period, our predictions indicate several counterfactual instances where an alternative convention location in a particular DMA would have ‘flipped’ a state in the convening party’s favor. Our predictions suggest the Democratic nominee could have won Massachusetts (by siting the convention in the Boston-Manchester media market) or Delaware (Philadelphia media market) in 1980; Florida (Miami or Tampa-St.Petersburg-Sarasota media markets) in 2000; and Missouri (Kansas City media market) in 2008. One of these counter-factual scenarios, Florida in 2000, would have given the presidency to the Democratic nominee, Al Gore. The GOP has less potential to flip states via convention siting decisions because they get smaller increases in vote totals in most of the DMAs where conventions have been held: In 1984 the GOP could have won Minnesota (by siting the RNC in the Minneapolis-St. Paul media market); and in 1992 they could have won Georgia (Atlanta media market). The 1984 flip is noteworthy, as it would have meant a clean sweep of all states for Reagan (the first since Monroe in 1820). But the GOP could also have tilted the balance in the Democrat’s favor by siting in the *wrong* media market: if the GOP had located its convention in either Tampa or Miami in 2000, our estimates suggest Al Gore would have won the state and thereby the Presidential election!

The Florida 2000 example is extreme, but it nonetheless illustrates the strategic importance of the siting decision: the conventions can have real, meaningful effects on the allocation of Electoral College votes, and therefore on the fate of the presidential election.

Beyond the presidential election, the convention siting decision may impact statewide and local-level vote outcomes (Senate, House, Governor, etc.).

Many factors go into convention siting decisions. Parties could site the convention specifically to gain a local advantage but the party could gain some other intangible benefit that outweighs any local electoral benefit (cost). According to our estimates, the selection of New York City cost George W. Bush considerable support in that media market. However, the Electoral College votes from the states in this DMA (NY, NJ and CT) would have gone to John Kerry anyway. Therefore, the national messaging value and other benefits of siting the Republican convention in New York following the 9/11 attacks likely outweighed the local electoral costs. It may also be the case that parties are not (or are not equally) adept at understanding the effects of the conventions (and similar campaign activities) on vote outcomes (Issenberg 2012). Keeping in mind that this is the first study that we know of to show that convention location does matter, campaigns may not know how conventions affect local outcomes, and how those effects are contingent on local context.

Conclusion

In terms of size, duration, and fanfare, conventions are distinctive compared to other campaign events, but they provide a unique opportunity to understand where and how campaigns matter. We analyzed the effect of presidential nominating conventions on county-level vote outcomes. Our finer-grained analysis shows statistically significant electoral relationships between local exposure to a convention and candidates' vote margins. Given that the local effects we observe occur over and above the backdrop of national effects, our results speak to the importance of strategically locating campaign events regardless of the *national* media coverage those events will receive.

Nominating conventions represent huge investments of time, personnel, and money. Where should parties cite their conventions to receive the maximum local advantage? The answer depends greatly on political-geographic context. Democrats can seek to leverage their convention site for electoral gain in strategically valuable DMAs composed of competitive counties and heavily Democratic counties. On the other hand, Republicans are confronted with trying to minimize the negative impact of their convention by siting it in DMAs with closely divided counties where there will be little net effect, since there will be Democratic gains in heavily Democratic counties and potential backlash in heavily Republican counties. Beyond enhancing our understanding of conventions (and its practical implications for the parties), this asymmetry in convention effects suggests investigating whether the impacts of other types of campaign events and activities are conditional on party pre-dispositions.

While available data does not allow for complete identification of the underlying mechanisms driving the aggregate and individual level effects we observe, our findings address several possibilities. While conventions may drive some people to vote, our aggregate analyses show that candidate preferences are much more strongly impacted than the decision to turnout. The findings therefore suggest a model of campaign effects in which increased information flows triggered by a local convention raise the awareness of voters—perhaps by aligning their preferences with their predispositions.

Democracy requires campaigns to communicate proposed policies so voters can make informed choices. Our findings suggest that campaigns can influence voters with events like nominating conventions—voters appear receptive to the stimulus of the increased information flow. However, predispositions and context heavily condition these effects, so campaigns may matter less than perhaps democratic theory suggests they should. Although many blame the

Electoral College for narrowing the geography of presidential campaigns, our analyses suggest there are only so many places strategic candidates would want to campaign regardless of the Electoral College, given the need to balance the gains and backlash that depend on so greatly on context.

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Tables

Table 1: Party National Convention Host Cities, 1972-2012

Year	DNC Site	RNC Site
1972	Miami	Miami
1976	New York City	Kansas City
1980	New York City	Detroit
1984	San Francisco	Dallas
1988	Atlanta	New Orleans
1992	New York	Houston
1996	Chicago	San Diego
2000	Los Angeles	Philadelphia
2004	Boston	New York City
2008	Denver	Minneapolis
2012	Charlotte	Tampa

Table 2: WLS Estimates of Coefficients in Model of Change in Democratic Presidential Vote Percentage, County Level Data

	Estimate	Std. Error
(Intercept)	6.53	0.4710 *
DNC in DMA	-15.9	3.1200 *
RNC in DMA	-3.35	3.9700
County Partisanship	-0.416	0.0186 *
(County Partisanship) ²	0.00338	0.0002 *
DNC in DMA × County Partisanship	0.545	0.1490 *
RNC in DMA × County Partisanship	0.053	0.1640
DNC in DMA × (County Partisanship) ²	-0.00323	0.0015 *
RNC in DMA × (County Partisanship) ²	0.000298	0.0016
Propensity Score	2.26	0.5630 *
Demographics		
Δ % Black	0.162	0.1960
Δ % White	0.127	0.1660
Δ % Asian	0.941	0.0814 *
Δ % Native American	0.580	0.2370 *
Δ % Hispanic	-0.514	0.0815 *
Δ % Younger than 25	-0.290	0.1340 *
Δ % Older than 65	0.354	0.1740 *
Δ % Urban	0.0165	0.0158
Δ % Female	1.15	0.1840 *
Δ % Married	-0.247	0.2270
Δ % Unemployed	0.387	0.1730 *
Δ % With College Education	-0.521	0.1190 *
Δ Median Income	0.0208	0.0386
Election Fixed Effects		
1976	22.6	0.3050 *
1980	-4.98	0.4180 *
1984	0.000980	0.2060
1988	9.41	0.2000 *
1992	1.75	0.2280 *
1996	8.91	0.2110 *
2000	1.56	0.222 *
2004	3.43	0.2120 *
2008	7.17	0.2420 *
2012	1.49	0.2250 *
<i>N</i>	34090	
<i>R</i> ²	0.6211	
$\sigma_{E[y x]}$	6.57	

A '*' indicates significance at the $\alpha=0.1$ level. Weights are the ratio of the logarithm of county vote totals to the logarithm of county centroid distances (in miles) with respect to nearest convention site. Standard errors are clustered by county.

Table 3: WLS Estimates of Coefficients in Model of Presidential Election Turnout, County Data

	Estimate	Std. Error
(Intercept)	7.67	0.365 *
DNC in DMA	-3.55	2.54
RNC in DMA	4.35	4.03
County Partisanship	0.0143	0.0103
(County Partisanship) ²	-0.000288	0.000119 *
DNC in DMA × County Partisanship	0.0853	0.131
RNC in DMA × County Partisanship	-0.155	0.178
DNC in DMA × (County Partisanship) ²	-0.000256	0.00155
RNC in DMA × (County Partisanship) ²	0.00142	0.00195
Propensity Score	2.31	0.730 *
Lagged Turnout	-13.3	0.431 *
Demographics		
Δ % Black	-0.453	0.435
Δ % White	-0.0653	0.379
Δ % Asian	0.421	0.0560 *
Δ % Native American	-0.506	0.292 *
Δ % Hispanic	-0.541	0.0815 *
Δ % Younger than 25	0.512	0.146 *
Δ % Older than 65	0.697	0.216 *
Δ % Urban	0.0180	0.0145
Δ % Female	1.64	0.153 *
Δ % Married	1.45	0.187 *
Δ % Unemployed	1.07	0.203 *
Δ % With College Education	1.79	0.144 *
Δ Median Income	0.179	0.0395 *
Percent Change in Population	-0.0753	0.0136 *
Election Fixed Effects		
1980	0.256	0.220
1984	-1.14	0.185 *
1988	-3.18	0.167 *
1992	4.36	0.170 *
1996	-6.12	0.168 *
2000	1.25	0.186 *
2004	4.75	0.156 *
2008	0.610	0.148 *
2012	-2.82	0.142 *
<i>N</i>	31013	
<i>R</i> ²	0.472	
$\sigma_{E[y x]}$	4.43	

A `*` indicates significance at the $\alpha=0.1$ level. Weights are the ratio of the logarithm of voting-age population to the logarithm of county centroid distances (in miles) with respect to nearest convention site. Standard errors are clustered by county.

Table 4: Probit Estimates of Coefficients in Model of Intention to Vote for Hosting Party After Convention using Individual Level Data from the 2000 & 2004 National Annenberg Election Study Panel Surveys

	DNC		RNC	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
(Intercept)	-0.739	0.158 *	-1.75	0.180 *
Vote for Host Party (Pre)	2.68	0.0869 *	2.69	0.0928 *
Locally Exposed to Convention	0.481	0.266 *	-0.799	0.404 *
Host Party (pre) × Locally Exposed	3.28	0.678	0.464	0.566
Placebo	0.264	0.235	-0.288	0.231
Female	0.208	0.0803 *	-0.246	0.0912 *
White	-0.440	0.104 *	0.466	0.124 *
Low Information	0.0453	0.0893	0.124	0.104
Above median religiosity	-0.224	0.0804 *	0.381	0.0911 *
Above median education	0.107	0.0865	-0.0883	0.0959
Above median Income	-0.137	0.0861	0.162	0.0969 *
2004 Election	-0.225	0.0808 *	-0.0162	0.0925
N	2056		1746	
AIC	1284		985.72	

A ** indicates significance at the $\alpha=0.1$ level.

Figures

Figure 1: Conditional Effects of Convention Exposure on Democratic Vote Share based on County Level Data

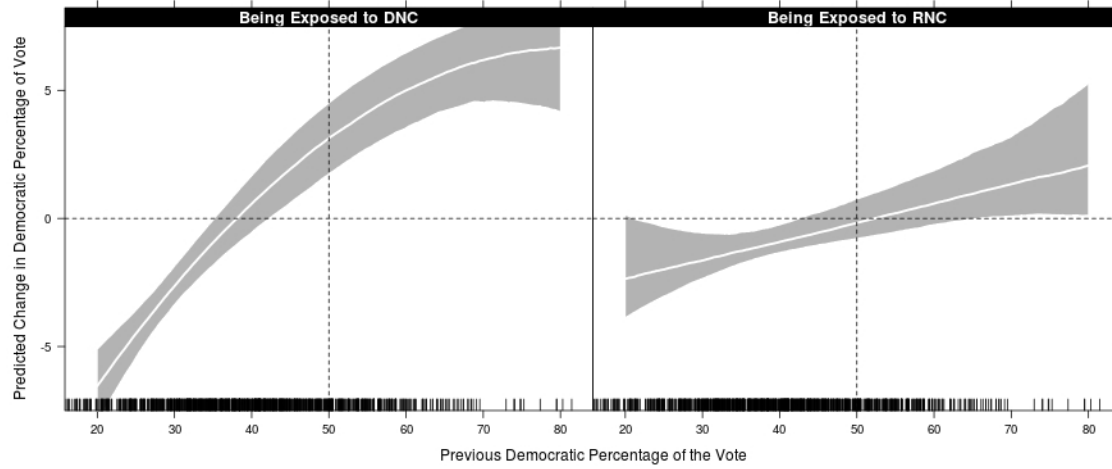


Figure 2: Conditional Effect of Exposure to Convention on Turnout based on County Level Data

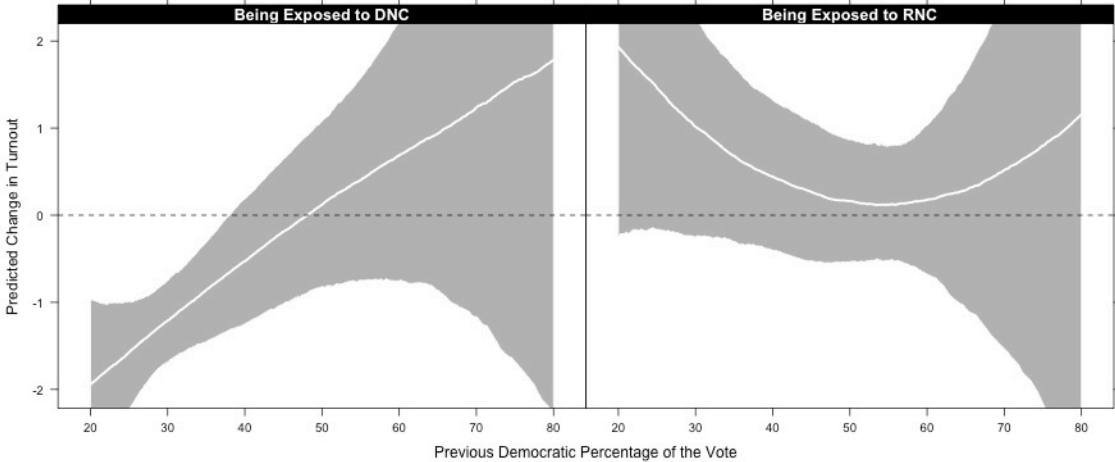


Figure 3: Kernel Density Estimates of Exposure Effects (on Exposed Respondents) on Vote Intention For Convention-hosting Party based on Individual Level Data from the 2000 & 2004 National Annenberg Election Study Panel Surveys

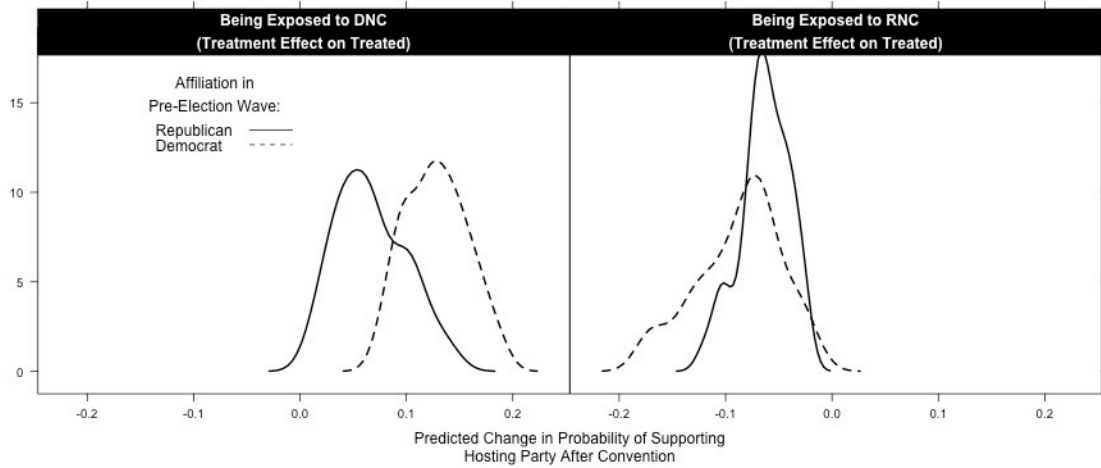
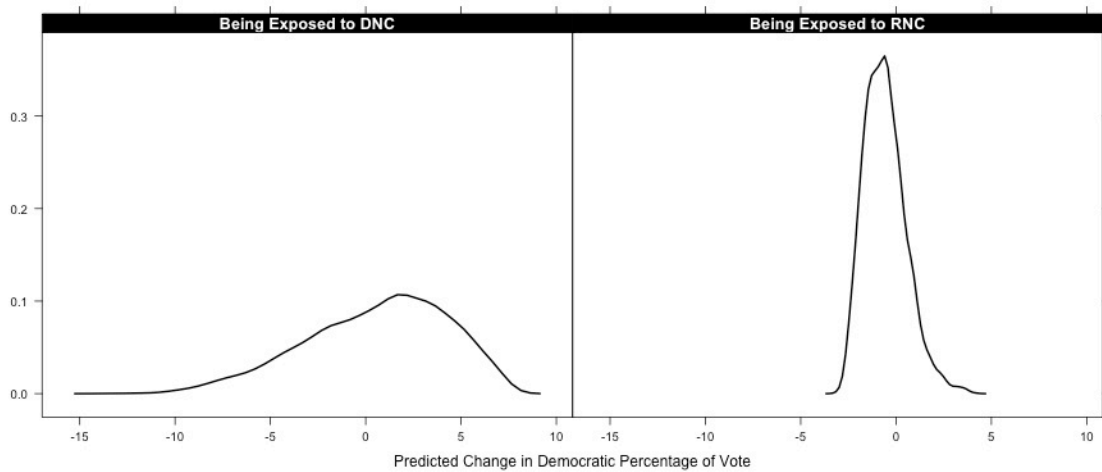


Figure 4: Kernel Density Estimates of Exposure Effects on Democratic Vote Shares across Counties in 2012 based on County Level Data



Note: The effects in Figure 4 are the first difference of predictions with and without exposure to each National Convention. They are intended to clarify and contextualize the results presented in Figure 1, as they convey essentially the same underlying information.

¹ Data and replication code necessary to reproduce the reported numerical results and graphics are available at www.joescinski.com. Appendices are available at www.cambridge.org. Authors listed in alphabetical order. Direct inquiries to Joseph E. Uscinski, 1300 Sano Campo Dr., Coral Gables, FL, 33131; uscinski@miami.edu.

² In fairness, the previous works mentioned were designed to explain state-level outcomes rather than parse out the effects of conventions—particularly Berry and Bickers (2012).

³ We provide models in the online appendix that use a similar metropolitan regional definition: the United States Census Bureau’s Metropolitan Statistical Areas [MSAs]. DMAs and MSAs overlap but are not identical. The results of the MSA models are substantively similar to the main findings presented here using DMAs.

⁴ We obtained county-level electoral results from David Leip’s online repository (Leip 2013). The online appendix provides models from a longer time period (1952-2012) covering the entire modern presidency; the results of these models confirm the main results presented here.

⁵ We provide additional models in the online appendix showing that statistically significant effects do permeate outside of the DMA, but diminish greatly by distance from the convention. The effects likely persist beyond DMA boundaries because DMA boundaries are first, imperfect measures of civic and social regions, and second, not determinative of information flow.

⁶ The Democrats sited their convention in New York in both 1976 and in 1980. Due to our difference-in-differences approach, we exclude the 1980 Democratic convention.

⁷ Our controls are county-level measures of the percent of African Americans, Whites, Hispanics, Asian, and Native Americans; the percent of people younger than 25 and older than 65; the percent of women; the percent of people living in urban settlements; the percent of married people; the percent of unemployed people; the percent of people with college degrees;

and the (2012 adjusted) median income, in thousands of dollars (Minnesota Population Center 2011). Tests reveal that our results are not affected by changes in third party voting. Linear interpolation was used for elections between decennial censuses. We investigated measures of campaign ad buys and candidate appearances. We discuss this data in the online appendix, but do not include it in the main analysis due to limitations in that data.

⁸ Our statistical model is completed by assuming normally distributed errors, the variances of which are inversely proportional to the population size of each county (as we are effectively modeling an average quantity, viz. vote percentages) and proportional to the distance of each county, in kilometers, to the county hosting the closest convention (since variability in electoral outcomes far from convention sites should not be taken as informative of the convention effects). This suggests using weighted least squares as the estimation technique, which we implement accordingly.

⁹ The *placebo* (propensity score) variable and year fixed effects are also included in this analysis. For this model we also implement a weighted least-squares technique, using population over distance as our chosen weights. For this model, “population” refers to all people over 18 years old, as this is the denominator of our *Turnout* variable.

¹⁰ While not a perfect measure of county-level partisanship, this method of measuring political context appears to be a standard in the literature, and the best available.

¹¹ The graph equivalent to Figure 1 created using the model estimated using the restricted data (1980-2012) is available in the Online Appendix.

¹² For panel dates and sizes, see www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/ResearchDataSets.aspx

¹³ These controls include information levels of the respondent; her religiosity; her sex; her level of education; her race and her income. We also include a fixed effect by election, and the

analogue of the placebo variable we use in the aggregate-level analysis (which we simply implement using an indicator of whether the respondent lives in a DMA where a convention was been hosted during the timespan of our study (1972-2012)).

¹⁴ To conduct this counterfactual analysis, we estimate the difference between hypothetical exposure and hypothetical non-exposure to each convention for all counties in a media market for Democratic vote share and turnout (i.e. combining both estimated aggregate-level models). We then re-calculate the state-level results using the observed results of unexposed counties. A “flip” occurs whenever a party is predicted to gain or lose the majority of the state’s two-party vote. For example, we calculate the net effect of hosting the 1984 GOP convention in St. Paul, MN by subtracting the predicted democratic vote share in the absence of the RNC (47.06%) from the predicted democratic vote share when counties in the St. Paul media market are exposed to the RNC (46.89%). We then add that net effect (-0.17) to the observed Democratic share of the two-party vote (50.09%). Since the net effect ($50.09\% + (-0.17) = 49.92\%$) causes the Democrats to lose their majority in the state, we say that a flip could have occurred.