

The Texas-Sized Impact of Beto O'Rourke's 2018 Senate Campaign

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Texas has not elected a Democrat statewide since 1994, the longest partisan shutout seen in any state. That did not change in 2018, when El Paso Democratic Representative Robert O’Rourke – popularly known as “Beto” – ran against Ted Cruz, an incumbent GOP Senator. Although Cruz survived, Beto’s surprisingly strong challenge upended Texas politics, garnering 48% of the vote in a state Republicans usually win by landslide margins. Beto’s energetic campaign made inroads into suburban districts and developed a robust campaign network of volunteers, offices, and staff that sparked a massive Democratic turnout in November 2018, when O’Rourke’s more than four million votes exceeded Hillary Clinton’s 2016 total by 200,000. The 2018 election suggests that gigantic Texas is fast turning into a competitive state – a development that amounts to an earthquake in national politics.

What made Beto’s remarkable Senate campaign possible, and how exactly has it contributed to shifts in Texas politics? Why was 2018 the year that Texas became a battleground? Although much ink has been spilled on O’Rourke’s personality and charisma, we chart a different path to address these questions by examining the organizational precursors and products of his campaign. We begin by tracing changes in the partisan landscape since the Civil Rights Movement, including the long decline in Democratic Party strength in Texas and its increasing confinement to major cities and Hispanic areas of the Rio Grande Valley. We survey recent efforts by organized groups like Battleground Texas and the Texas Organizing Project to revive political competition in the state, and then probe two important organizational elements in O’Rourke’s 2018 campaign. First, we examine Beto’s “254 Strategy,” his project to visit each of the 254 counties in Texas between March 2017 and June 2018 to contact voters missed by Democrats for a generation. Although this likely helped O’Rourke boost his credibility and name recognition and cultivate an amiable reputation, it did not win new votes in rural Texas. In the

final six months before November 2018, Beto’s campaign focus shifted dramatically towards large metropolitan areas and involved opening more than 700 Grassroots HQs and “Pop-Up Offices” where staff and volunteers coordinated to turn out the vote. Coincident with the Beto campaign, many Indivisible grassroots resistance groups also took to the field. Focusing on these efforts, the second part of our analysis uses statistical models to estimate the electoral effects of the O’Rourke campaign infrastructure and the presence of Indivisible groups. Controlling for past election results and a battery of socioeconomic and demographic covariates, we find evidence of meaningful, if modest, effects from these organizational networks.

As we spell out in this chapter, even though Beto O’Rourke ultimately did not unseat Ted Cruz, his strong performance mattered in several ways. On Election night, Beto’s coattails contributed to down-ballot Democratic successes in unseating two incumbent Republican members of Congress and winning 14 state legislative seats and dozens of local contests. The earlier unfolding of his campaign may have accelerated the rebuilding of statewide Democratic Party infrastructure by developing new connections, experience, data, and organizing skills to pass forward into future campaigns. And not least important, O’Rourke’s surprisingly strong 2018 performance has prompted ongoing efforts from the national Democratic Party to invest new field offices and staff in Texas – with an eye to competing hard for new legislative seats and even the presidency in 2020 and beyond.

THE PRIOR ORGANIZATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Beto’s 2018 campaign emerged in the context of long-term decline and failure for Democrats in Texas, yet the campaign’s efforts also built on and benefited from large-scale liberal organizing efforts that had been underway for many years in Texas. Since 2010, groups

associated in the Texas Organizing Project had focused on local issues to expand the electorate and boost Democratic prospects in the most populous counties. In 2012, the “Battleground Texas” project entered the scene, holding voter drives and training volunteers to conduct their own mobilization efforts. Finally, around the same time that the Beto campaign got going various anti-Trump resistance groups like those in the national Indivisible and Swing Left networks entered the scene. While Texas remained staunchly red, all of these organizing efforts helped shape the context in which the O’Rourke campaign operated, laying the groundwork for a robust statewide Democratic campaign.

The Decline of Texas Democrats

Like much of the South, Texas was a one-party Democratic stronghold for the bulk of the 20th Century. However, the Civil Rights Movement and rapid population growth weakened the Democratic stranglehold on the levers of power, and two-party competition emerged in Texas. Compared to other parts of the South, this process occurred relatively earlier in Texas, where massive growth of cities and suburbs brought outsiders without peculiarly southern partisan loyalty to the Democratic Party. At the national level, Eisenhower won the state twice in 1952 and 1956, and no Democratic Presidential candidate has carried the state since 1976. In 1961, Republican John G. Tower won a special election to the Senate with 50.6% of votes, filling the Senate seat vacated by incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson who had become Vice President. This victory brought to power the first statewide Republican in Texas since Reconstruction (Tower was also the first modern Republican Senator in the entire former Confederacy). Capitalizing further on these gains, and Texans’ frustrations with the Kennedy Administration and its push for civil rights legislation, the Republicans won two additional Congressional seats in 1962. By 1978, Republicans won their first victory in a Governor’s race in a century, an event described as

demarcating an “entirely new type of politics in the state, establishing a viable Republican Party and a shaken and weakening Democratic Party for the next generation of Texas politicians.”¹

In a few decades, the narrative changes from “first Republicans to win statewide” to “the last Democrats to win.” In 1988, Texas re-elected Democratic Senator Lloyd Bentsen, the last Democratic Senator to win in Texas. In 1994, George W. Bush unseated incumbent governor Democrat Ann Richards, the last Texas Democrat to serve as Governor. That same year was the last time Democrats won any statewide office: incumbent Democrats held onto their posts on downballot executive offices like Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, and Land Commissioner (indeed, Lt. Governor Bob Bullock handily won re-election with 60% of the vote). But none of these officeholders ran for re-election in 1998, and all were replaced by Republicans. Since then, no Democrat has won statewide in Texas, and longstanding majorities in the state Congress and the state’s Congressional delegation had vanished by the early 2000s. The small minority of Democrats in elected office have been relegated to the big cities and the heavily Hispanic parts of southern Texas.

One consequence of declining Democratic Party strength in Texas is the exodus of skilled staffers to run campaigns. A drought of statewide officials and other officeholders left party staffers without full-time work between campaigns, prompting them to leave Texas. The absence of such talent imposes barriers on candidates seeking to challenge Republicans. In 2018, Democratic candidates for state legislature were unable to hire, and relied on inexperienced volunteers.² These organizational hurdles create a negative feedback loop that hinders Democratic electoral success, as strong candidates are discouraged from running, in turn further eroding the pool of trained staff and further reducing turnout and electoral wins.³ This dynamic of weak candidates and low turnout produces a “perpetual downward spiral.”⁴

The degradation of Texas Democrats also had an effect on the state party organization. State party fundraising has become anemic. In 2002, the state party raised nearly \$20 million; in the most recent cycle—2018—it raised just 1.5 million.⁵ Although the 2002 numbers were atypical for the party, the Texas Democratic Party consistently raised about \$5 million or just under in competitive election years. Since 2010, the numbers have always been less than \$3 million—with the past midterm and presidential cycle well under \$2 million. County-level organization appears to have dwindled somewhat as well. Between 2013 to 2018, Texas Democratic county parties regressed on several metrics of infrastructure. The percentage of counties with a Democratic office available by either email, phone, or county chair dropped within five years.⁶ In 2013, just under 100% of Texas counties had a Democratic presence available by phone, but by 2018 that number had dropped to 80%.

Despite longstanding electoral losses, a persistent source of optimism for Texas Democrats is favorable demographic change. The backbone of the Texas Democratic Party was once rural whites, and Republican gains in the 20th Century came from growing urban centers like Dallas. The contemporary electoral geography is reversed: Democratic success is centered in the cities and majority-Latino places in the Rio Grande.⁷ In a mirror image of the previous realignment, growth in the cities and especially suburbs, as well as soaring immigration, portended Democratic successes. If Democrats could activate these constituencies, they could win in Texas.

The Texas Organizing Project and Battleground Texas

In recent years, in fact, much liberal organizing in Texas has centered on engaging, registering, and mobilizing low-income, Latino, and black voters. Founded in 2010 by alumni of ACORN, a now-defunct national consortium of community-organizing groups, the Texas Organizing Project – dubbed “TOP” for short – has focused on mobilizing such citizens in the

Lone Star state big cities of Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio. To convince voters that participating in politics matters, TOP groups have emphasized local issues like disaster aid, bail reform, and public works. TOP has scored major wins on local issues like paid-sick leave for city workers, and it has boosted progressive candidates in local elections for district attorney and sheriff. In addition to year-round organizing on local issues, TOP runs voter mobilization campaigns targeting irregular voters and the group hopes to register 850,000 new voters by 2022.⁸ TOP is not alone in its efforts to mobilize irregular voters. Other groups like Jolt and the Latino Vote Project focus on potential Latino voters, who have lower rates of participation than both blacks and whites.

By 2013, Texas organizing efforts ramped up even further. Led by Jeremy Bird, the Obama 2012 national field director, a cadre of former Obama campaign staffers set-up shop in Texas. Aiming to make the Lone Star state truly competitive, they formed Battleground Texas, whose operating philosophy was to “make Texas a battleground state by treating it as one” – specifically by investing into candidate recruitment, voter registration, and mobilization the same sorts of resources spent in traditional swing states.⁹ Pointing out that Texas has had dismal levels of voter participation, Battleground Texas operatives argued that “Texas is not a Republican state—it’s a nonvoting state,” a slogan later repeated by the O’Rourke campaign. Indeed, GOPer Rick Perry won the 2010 governor’s race with support from just 18% of voting-age population.¹⁰ Draconian GOP-installed voter registration laws require official appointments for voter registration volunteers in each county and make minor mistakes a misdemeanor offense. Along with widespread apathy after many uncompetitive election cycles, such laws had impeded the expansion of the electorate.

The 2014 election provided the first opportunity to assess the impact of Battleground Texas – and that contest went quite poorly for Texas Democrats. Despite a lot of national donor enthusiasm, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Wendy Davis garnered only 38% of the vote, losing ground compared to the 2010 Democratic candidate Bill White. Still, Battleground Texas credited itself with building infrastructure in the state, including registering about 100,000 new voters, training 25,000 volunteers, and developing new data banks. Those achievements could help Democrats in the future. As one candidate for the State House explained, “I didn’t win, but Battleground Texas helped me increase turnout significantly. And because we cleaned up the data file ... [and] now have a solid network of volunteers in the district, the next person who runs for that seat will start at a considerable advantage over me.”¹¹ After the 2014 election, Battleground Texas centered its efforts on voter registration, expanding the electorate with targeted outreach towards Latinos and young-voters. These efforts paid dividends. Operatives affiliated with Republican Governor Greg Abbott’s 2018 campaign hold Battleground Texas responsible for the increasing Democratic lean of Harris County, Texas’s most populous.¹²

A final wave of local organizing by Indivisible-connected and other kinds of grassroots resistance groups erupted in Texas after the election and inauguration of President Donald Trump – along the same lines as groups discussed in many other chapters of this book. Unlike TOP or Jolt, which focus on low-income and minority citizens in cities, Indivisible groups dominate in college-educated suburbs and are typically led by middle-aged or older white women. Anecdotally, a large number of activists and volunteers for the O’Rourke campaign were also active members of Indivisible groups, including many of the 500 women “Beto Ambassadors” who comprised his most dedicated volunteers.¹³ Indivisible groups have played a big role in registering new voters as well. Julie Gilberg, an Indivisible organizer, local

Democratic party leader, and activist in the O'Rourke campaign, explained that, besides gerrymandering, the reason why Texas is a non-voting state—and thus a red state—is because it “hasn't had the canvassing infrastructure, people haven't been going out, knocking on doors.”¹⁴ Erin Zwiner, in Hays County outside of Austin, became an activist with Indivisible and a successful candidate for state house, where her campaign divided up canvassing efforts with the local Indivisible group. The county has added 20,000 new voters since the 2016 election, partially due to registration efforts by the Indivisible chapter.¹⁵

BETO'S FIRST PHASE – THE 254 COUNTY STRATEGY

Beto O'Rourke launched his campaign officially on an El Paso rooftop on March 31st, 2017— and a persistent early campaign theme was reaching out to Texas voters who had long been overlooked. Thus O'Rourke proclaimed a plan to visit all 254 counties in Texas, a plan that got outsized media coverage for a time, even though various (always unsuccessful) Texas Democratic statewide candidates over the years have visited every county since the 1980s. How did Beto's “254 County Strategy” actually play out in the Senate campaign and for the Texas Democratic party more generally?

New Twists in a Longstanding 254 County Strategy

In Austin, just one day after he launched his 2018 campaign, O'Rourke proclaimed “I'm gonna work my heart out. I'm gonna walk my shoes off. I'm gonna be in every one of these 254 counties working for you, making sure that when 2018 comes we have something to celebrate for Texas and for this country.”¹⁶ As noted in an *Austin Statesman* article, the idea for visiting all counties in Texas came from former Texas Governor Mark White.¹⁷ “I called your dad” O'Rourke recalled in speaking with White's son, and he said “Don't forget it's a 254-county

race.”¹⁸ As a matter of fact, traveling to all 254 counties has a history among Texas Democrats. In the late 1980s, John Odam, a Democratic candidate for Attorney General who ended up losing by eight points, visited every county courthouse in the state, as he later recounted in a book called *Courtin Texas*.¹⁹ In 1996, Victor Morales visited each county in an eccentric challenge to incumbent Senator Phil Gramm. Morales had no staff, decided to run on a dare and drove across the state in a white pickup truck, drawing comparisons to Lyndon B. Johnson’s strategy of flying to events in a helicopter.²⁰ Although Morales claims the strategy won him votes, he picked up just a 44% share.²¹ Again in 2012, the Democratic Senate candidate Paul Sadler visited every county as he lost to Cruz; however, news coverage called Sadler the “unequivocal underdog” and did not mention his visiting any county, much less 254 of them.²²

Following in the footsteps of earlier Democrats, O’Rourke embarked on a 15-month 254 county voyage across Texas – but unlike his predecessors, O’Rourke gained a concrete uptick in name recognition and a reputation as a serious candidate. This time, both traditional media and social media amplified the Democratic candidate’s efforts across Texas, projecting his travels to the country as a whole. For the Beto campaign, this strategy was not just about travel. It was choreographed to boost O’Rourke’s reputation as an earnest and energetic campaigner, and his first campaign ad, called “Showing Up,” was filmed on an iPhone and opened with a voiceover from O’Rourke saying “The only way for me to be able to deliver for the people of Texas is to show up in every community, in every county.”²³ O’Rourke linked the physical act of visiting every county—usually driving himself for hours on end—with his commitment to speak for voters who had been overlooked. “Writing no person off. Taking no person for granted” was the oft-repeated mantra as Beto’s campaign touted the 254 county commitment as a concrete example of his listening skills and ability.²⁴

This adept and persistent social-media livestreaming of O’Rourke’s travels marked a significant departure from analogous previous efforts – amplifying his reach and overcoming the inefficiencies of campaigning in counties with tiny populations dwarfed by single neighborhoods of some larger counties. Even though O’Rourke met with just two or three voters out of 150 residents of Loving County, for example, his livestreams driving around west Texas reached several thousand people watching online.²⁵ While physically present in small town Texas, O’Rourke was speaking to a statewide—and even nationwide—audience of politicians, activists, and donors. Additionally, local and sometimes even national media picked up his visits. Features or interviews mentioning O’Rourke’s 254 county strategy appeared on CNN and on a local Fox 24 station and on High Plains Public Radio, as well as in the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, the *Texas Tribune*, the *El-Paso Times*, the *Austin-American Statesman*, *Esquire*, the *North Texas Daily*, and the *Dallas News*, among many others. Visiting all 254 counties showcased O’Rourke’s outreach to small town Texas and built his reputation for a nationwide audience.

What did the Strategy Look Like On the Ground?

Analyzing a subset of county visits reveals the strategic underpinnings of individual stops along the 254-county tour. To identify how campaign events changed across time and between geographies, we collected and coded the location and type of all 391 campaign events advertised on O’Rourke’s social media and campaign website from April 2017, December 2017, and January through November of 2018. We coded April 2017 events to register the start of the campaign, and December 2017 through November 2018 to grasp key moments of the campaign’s development leading up to Election Day. December 2017 and the subsequent year contains the bulk of the campaign’s efforts. We used these data to piece together how visits around the state

played out in different areas and how his campaign style differed during and after O'Rourke completed his tour of all the state's counties in June 2018.

Although O'Rourke's county stops took many different forms, the most common events he advertised were town halls, rallies, meet & greets, and happy hours and events with bands. There were some events that were more creative—like a February 10th, 2018 town hall held in a movie theater with a bowling alley in Bay City, which has a population of less than 20,000 people—and some that seemed born out of convenience or necessity—like a donut stop in Sonora on the way to Eldorado from Rocksprings in April of 2018. When he could, O'Rourke would cram as many events as possible in twelve hours, sometimes up to seven events throughout the day in seven different locations. Many of these events centered on college-aged voters or in Democratic-leaning areas. He held several events at Texas colleges and hosted concerts as campaign stops—with headliners from Willie Nelson to local mariachi bands.

What O'Rourke did during these visits varied between urban and rural places. In our sample of events, he hosted 104 town halls in rural counties (out of the 176 town halls he hosted from the total sample), 19 rallies, 6 voting events, and 8 events of other types (including donut stops, marches, and bowling). At these rural stops O'Rourke spent his time in local bars, restaurants, and cafes, as well as locations like libraries, schools, and personal residences. In contrast, suburban and urban county visits were usually larger and less intimate; the campaign most often visited parks, universities, and local eateries. In all types of counties he hosted events in arenas such as concert halls, ballrooms, hotel spaces, and theaters. Total, about 7% of O'Rourke's visits were at local universities, about 26% were at local bars, restaurants, or cafes, 27% at event or entertainment venues, 19% at parks, and 18% at other types of locations.

In the most sparsely populated counties, O'Rourke's visits took the form of a listening tour. Coverage of O'Rourke's stop in Loving County (which has fewer than 200 residents) shows that he knocked on doors and conversed with anyone who would engage with him. When a resident introduced himself to O'Rourke as a Republican, the candidate responded with "That's okay, you don't have to vote for us," before engaging in a discussion about the political issues weighing on the man's mind.²⁶ O'Rourke even hosted an early morning breakfast town hall at a Sonic drive-in in Ozona, population just above 3,000, along with similar events in places with populations of less than 500 people.²⁷ These events were not in vain. In Lubbock, Texas, a medium-sized city which went to Trump by over 60%, Beto's visits began with a couple dozen people coming out to hear him speak at a local barbecue joint; but by the end of the campaign over 900 people attended an event in Lubbock.²⁸

However, only rarely did O'Rourke hold events implying coordination with local organizations. In our sample, a total of 17 events were held at the meeting spaces of local organizations. The most common of these were veterans' groups (six events), union groups (five events), or coordination with the local government (five events). Beto would speak with or host a roundtable at the county judge's office, the local sheriff's haunt, or the city hall. In January 2018, he hosted a town hall at Missouri City's Justice of the Peace Precinct Two Courtroom. There was also coordination with three senior citizen's centers, 10 churches, six schools, and nine libraries. Coordination with local organizations was mostly done in rural counties. Ten of the 17 events held with local organizations were hosted in counties with less than 55,000 people—oftentimes less than 20,000 people. Four of the six veteran group visits were in rural counties. Perhaps O'Rourke had to grapple with the reality that redder, less dense counties may not be suitable rallies and so opted instead to host a roundtable or veterans' town hall. Hosting events with

locally rooted civic associations could also have been a product of necessity given available venue space in sparsely populated areas.

Where the O'Rourke campaign hosted events also speaks its relations with other candidates, organizations, and the Democratic Party. O'Rourke rarely, if ever, hosted events or coordinated with organizations in a manner that would imply some broader organizational history or future partnership with Texas Democrats. In 2018 the only O'Rourke campaign event sponsored at a state Democratic Party space featuring Beto himself or a surrogate was a September 14th meet and greet with his mom and sister in the Ellis county Democratic headquarters.²⁹ Most of O'Rourke's events were for his candidacy alone; he only occasionally co-campaigned with other candidates like Colin Allred from Dallas, or local Texas figures like the Castro brothers. This singular campaigning style created friction with other Democratic candidates at times. He refused to endorse Democratic challenger Gina Ortiz Jones against Congressman Will Hurd in a district near El Paso, and she narrowly lost the race by 926 votes.³⁰ An Indivisible organizer in the area said "All I kept thinking was, wait, Beto is supposed to be helping us because he's a Democrat...I really felt like Beto was just getting in my way."³¹

Still, O'Rourke and other Democratic candidates and organizations coordinated in important ways. The O'Rourke campaign had access to the Texas Democrats' voter information, which they used to target up to 5.5 million potential voters from cell and landline phone numbers.³² O'Rourke's campaign returned the favor and shared its own voter database with other Democrat candidates, as well as allowing them to use his campaign space and talk at his events.³³ Undoubtedly, Democrats up and down the ticket tried to hang onto O'Rourke's coattails and the unprecedented excitement he was creating for Democrats in the state.

BETO'S SECOND PHASE – THE METROPOLITAN SHIFT

O'Rourke's campaign strategy shifted significantly towards metropolitan areas after finishing the 254-county tour. He spent more of his time in suburban and urban counties, using the last few months to bolster support in areas with favorable demographics. In counties with more than 56,000 people, O'Rourke hosted 72 town halls, 51 rallies, 43 events for voting purposes, 20 meet and greets, 18 concerts or events with music, 14 happy hours, 11 runs, and 37 other events—such as an August Dallas campaign office opening and a December “Tacos with Beto” in Fort Worth. These events often drew crowds in the thousands—55,000 people showed up for a September 29th, 2018 rally with country star Willie Nelson³⁴ There were also more intimate events, like the San Antonio blockwalk on August 16th, when over a dozen people attended, and events somewhere in between—like the San Angelo “Beers with Beto” event at The Concho Pearl Icehouse for 200-600 people.³⁵ Although event attendance varied based on event size and event type, one thing is certain: demand for Beto was high and the campaign did their best to deliver.

The Final Push in Urban and Suburban Texas

Total in our sample, O'Rourke visited rural counties 138 times, suburban counties 95 times, and urban counties 158 times. Before completing visits to every Texas county, he spent substantial time across the entire state, including more Republican-leaning, less populous counties. During the 254-county tour period, less than 30% of events were in urban counties (200,000 people and above) and about 46% were in rural counties (55,000 people or below). But after completing his visits of 254 counties in June 2018, O'Rourke mainly focused his efforts revisiting the largest ones; during this period, about half of his events were in urban counties and just 25% were in rural ones. In total, he visited the counties containing San Antonio, Dallas, Fort

Worth, Austin, and Houston at least 15 times each, while other counties received just one visit, oftentimes not even publicized on social media. The O'Rourke campaign valued its time in urban and suburban areas the most—using the rural counties as stops along the way to 254. After achieving this target, he stopped visiting counties off-the-beaten trail, but still made stops in some rural counties and in small cities on the way between bigger cities.

O'Rourke acknowledged that his campaign would spend the majority of the last six months before November working in the larger areas with more likely Beto voters.³⁶ In the last month before the election, the campaign focused on “get out the vote” efforts in big cities, and kept the Congressman bouncing between Austin, Houston, and Dallas for the month of October. In the last 12 days alone O'Rourke made 25 stops along I-35 corridor, which runs from Laredo in south Texas up to Dallas and the Oklahoma border, trying to get out the vote in this area.³⁷

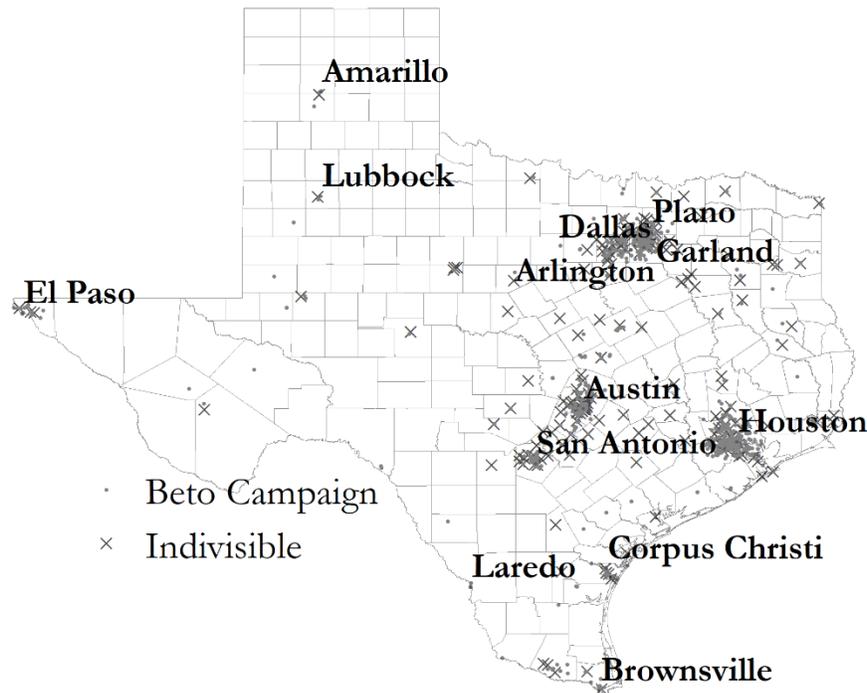
Organizing to Reach Voters

In addition to O'Rourke's personal outreach, the campaign launched a massive get-out-the-vote operation, including more than 700 “Pop-Up” offices and grassroots headquarters. Pop-Up offices were volunteer-run spaces like homes, offices, and restaurants which served as hubs for reaching unlikely voters. Paid-staff provided informational training, campaign literature and other support to multiple Pop-Ups, creating hubs where senior volunteers trained other volunteers to canvass nearby neighborhoods and precincts in order to meet widely shared campaign door-knocking targets. This “distributed-organizing” model—sometimes dubbed “Uber for organizing”—was developed during the 2016 Bernie Sanders Campaign and has been touted as a model for future Democratic organizing. David Wysong, a senior O'Rourke aide and campaign strategist who hired the architects of the 2016 Sanders campaign to O'Rourke's camp,

attributed the campaign's overperformance of the polls to its robust fieldwork. In total, the campaign knocked on a staggering 2.8 million doors and made 20 million phone calls.³⁸

To study the effects of this campaign organizing systematically, we obtained the addresses of the campaign Grassroots HQs and Pop-Up offices by scraping all events listed on the O'Rourke's Campaign's website and identifying these field offices by string searches. After standardizing and cleaning these hand-entered addresses and geocoding addresses using Esri's ArcMap, 734 campaign offices matched to the street or address level and were included in the analysis. As Figure 11.1 shows, campaign offices were concentrated in major metropolitan areas and suburbs, though a handful dot some of the less populated counties of Texas. Just seventy-six counties (29.9%) had at least one campaign office, but these counties comprise about 90% of the state's population. Dallas County and Harris County had the most offices, with 103 and 168 respectively.

FIGURE 11.1: Locations of O’Rourke Campaign Offices and Texas Indivisible Groups



The map shows, across Texas counties, the locations of Beto Pop-Up Offices and Grassroots Headquarters (dots) and Indivisible Groups (indicated by X's). While most counties have no campaign office and no Indivisible Group, the state's population centers and suburbs feature multiple of each.

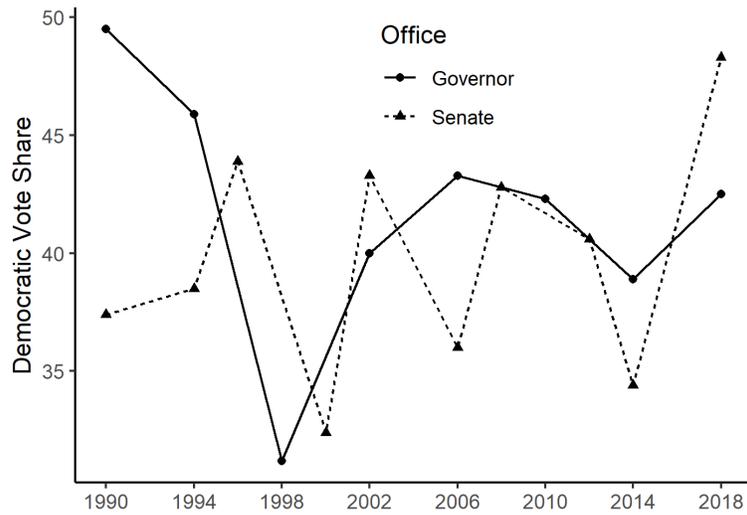
Along with these campaign offices, anti-Trump resistance or Indivisible-affiliated groups which proliferated in the months following Trump's inauguration and the Women's March played a major role in 2018 Texas outreach. As mentioned earlier, there is some crossover between local Indivisible activists and the most dedicated O'Rourke volunteers. Independent of the campaign, however, Indivisible groups worked to register and mobilize voters. To study this systematically, we obtained the locations of Indivisible contacts from an August 2017 web-scrape of the Indivisible Website, generously provided by Vanessa Williamson. There were 270 Indivisible contacts in Texas included in the analysis, mostly found in major metropolitan areas and suburbs, as indicated in Figure 11.1. Seventy-two (28.4%) counties had at least one

Indivisible contacts; Harris County and Travis County had 38 and 40 different contacts, respectively.

ANALYZING THE ELECTORAL RESULTS

To assess the success of the 254 Strategy and the subsequent push in metropolitan places, we now analyze the electoral geography of the 2018 Senate Race. O'Rourke received an impressive 48% of votes in his 2018 Senate bid, a higher vote share than any statewide Democratic candidate in Texas in recent memory. His 4 million votes also constituted the most votes ever cast for a Democrat in Texas, exceeding Hillary Clinton's total by about 200,000. This is especially remarkable given that electoral trends in Texas have been getting worse for Democrats, rather than better, as Figure 11.2 shows. Since 1994, no Texas Democrat has won statewide office, and the share of votes accruing to Democratic candidates steadily declined over the next 20 years. In 2014, despite high hopes and considerable outside fundraising, Democrats scored new lows on statewide ballots, with gubernatorial candidate Wendy Davis receiving less than 40% of the vote and Senate candidate David Alameel receiving just 34% of the vote. O'Rourke reversed this longstanding decline, gaining 14 percentage points over his predecessor running for Senate.

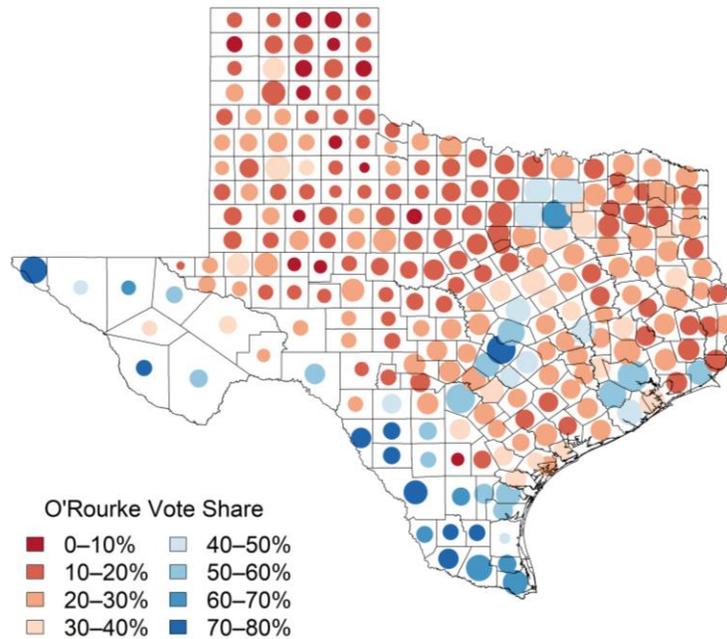
FIGURE 11.2: Statewide Democratic Vote Share 1990-2018, by Office



Democratic votes for Senate (dashed) and Governor (solid) from 1990 to 2018. O'Rourke's Senate performance reverses longstanding declines.

O'Rourke's 48% also topped the Democratic ticket, though only barely, with state candidates for Attorney General and Lt. Governor receiving 47% of the vote, and gubernatorial candidate Lupe Valdez receiving about 43%. His gains were made alongside massive advances in Democratic turnout, particularly among young voters. Where did his support come from? Did Beto's outreach to far-flung counties in Texas persuade rural voters to support him? Or were his gains made primarily in the more densely populated parts of Texas?

FIGURE 11.3: Electoral Geography of 2018 Senate Race.



The plot shows, for each county, the support for O'Rourke (bluer implies more support) and the total number of votes (on a logarithmic scale). O'Rourke performed well in major metropolitan areas and in the heavily Latino counties southern Texas.

The geography of O'Rourke's electoral performance sheds light on this question. As Figure 11.3 illustrates, O'Rourke's support was concentrated in the state's more populous counties and suburbs. Though O'Rourke visited all 254 Texas counties, he won just 32 of them. Indeed, more than half of his votes came from just 5 counties, and more than 75% came from just 11 counties. While the skewed population of Texas counties drives much of this unequal distribution in votes, support for Cruz was somewhat more diffuse than for O'Rourke. Cruz received half of his vote from 11 counties (compared to O'Rourke's 5) and 75% of his votes from 39 counties (compared to 11 for O'Rourke).

Garnering about 25% of rural votes, O'Rourke slightly outperformed Hillary Clinton among rural voters, but only by 2 percentage points. But he vastly underperformed among rural voters relative to some other recent Democrats. In 2002, the Democratic candidate for Senate

received 40% of the rural vote.”³⁹ O’Rourke received a smaller vote share than Paul Sadler, Cruz’s Democratic opponent in 2012, in 185 counties (though O’Rourke did much better overall).⁴⁰ He also underperformed in rural counties relative to some other statewide Democratic candidates. Mike Collier, a moderate Democrat and ex-Republican, focused on bread-and-butter issues like public education funding and property taxes in his campaign for Lieutenant Governor. Collier contrasted his pragmatism with the extremism of the Tea Party-connected incumbent Dan Patrick. His campaign manager described Collier as a “gateway Democrat” for Republicans “who want someone they can hold their nose for.”⁴¹ Although Collier lacked the fundraising and campaign apparatus of O’Rourke, he outperformed O’Rourke in 171 of the 254 counties in Texas.⁴² Garnering 47% of votes, Collier’s skeleton campaign performed neck-and-neck with O’Rourke, though he tended to perform better than O’Rourke in traditionally-Republican and rural counties and worse in big cities and suburbs (of course, Collier probably benefited from pro-O’Rourke and anti-Trump sentiment which brought out straight-ticket Democratic votes).

Why did O’Rourke’s outreach to these places fail to swing over many votes? One important barrier comes from a nationalized politics, with strong partisanship acting as a firewall against Democratic inroads in rural Texas. While many rural voters came out to hear what Beto had to say, he was still a Democrat running for Senate, and it did not help that O’Rourke took progressive stances to rural Texas where President Trump is extremely popular.

O’Rourke prided himself on his authenticity and transparency, meaning that liberal Dallas county got the same message as conservative Borden—which voted for Donald Trump by more than 90%.⁴³ Across the state, O’Rourke expressed his support for universal health care, impeaching President Trump, and kneeling during the national anthem to protest police brutality against African Americans, messages likely out-of-step with rural Texas. O’Rourke ran as a

staunch liberal even though his Congressional voting record shows he was 77% more conservative than other Democrats.⁴⁴ In emphasizing progressive stances in rural counties, rather than his moderate voting record, he might have missed an opportunity to grab votes. Mark White, a son of Texas Democratic governor Bill White, argued that O'Rourke "literally" campaigned in all counties, but did not sincerely reach out to moderate Texas voters. A resident of San Saba county, where O'Rourke got a mere 11.9% of the vote, described it like this: "People came out and listened to him but then decided not to vote for him. Free education. Free health care. Open borders. Anybody can come in."⁴⁵

However, this consistent progressive messaging did not preclude O'Rourke from making material gains over previous Texas Democrats or from topping the ticket in non-rural areas. He made new inroads into suburban areas, as did Democrats nationwide in 2018, and benefited from supercharged turnout among urban counties and Democratic-leaning constituencies. A whopping 53% of registered voters turned out in the 2018 midterms, compared to 33.7% in 2014 and youth turnout rates more than doubled compared to the 2014 midterms.⁴⁶ Democratic gains were especially noteworthy in the urban and suburban counties comprising the I-35 corridor. These counties saw a massive swing to Democrats between 2014 and 2018—about 800,000 votes—resulting in ten Democratic flips in the statehouse (of twelve total) and both of the flips Democrats made in the state Senate.⁴⁷ In 2018, Tarrant County, which includes Fort Worth, went blue by 3,869 votes—or just under 1%—and Williamson County and Hays County outside Austin also went blue—Hays by 12,186 votes and Williamson by 5,773 votes.⁴⁸ Smaller cities like Corpus Christi helped turn Nueces County blue, despite voting Republican in the last few cycles. Both population growth and increases in turnout are located in the urban and suburban parts of Texas where O'Rourke improved on his predecessors. In contrast, the rural counties

which held steadfast for Ted Cruz are not growing and thus comprise a decreasing portion of the electorate. As Kirk Goldsberry of *FiveThirtyEight* points out, “Those areas may be staunchly red, but they’re also staunchly stagnant too.”⁴⁹ Indeed, by pitching a consistent progressive message, even in rural Texas, Beto energized liberals in Texas and nationwide, cultivating a huge following among donors and activists. This excitement and fundraising, in turn, galvanized an unprecedented ground-game, the effects of which we now turn to study.

To estimate the electoral effect of these mobilization efforts, we aggregated campaign offices and Indivisible Contacts to the county-level and calculated the density per 10,000 people for each of these organizations to proxy for levels of organizational capacity. Next, using a population-weighted least-squares regression model, we estimated the association between the two treatment variables—campaign office density and Resistance group density—and the dependent variable, Democratic votes as a proportion of registered voters in the county in November 2018. This dependent variable increases both as a function of voter persuasion (O’Rourke receiving a larger proportion of votes cast) and mobilization (a larger number of voters turning out for O’Rourke, rather than abstaining from voting), so it provides a comprehensive measure of political support. To reduce the risk of confounding, we control for past Democratic support (a lagged dependent variable from the 2016 election) as well as a variety of socioeconomic, demographic variables obtained from the Texas Association of Counties Website. The control variables are county percent Hispanic, percent black, percent rural, percent college educated, median income, population density, median age, and a dummy for El Paso County, O’Rourke’s home county. Adjusting for these potential confounders gives more confidence that we are capturing the independent effect of organizational density on Democratic support.

Controlling for these other factors, the density of campaign pop-up offices per 10,000 people had a positive and statistically significant association with Democratic support ($\beta = 2.7$; $p < 0.05$). Similarly, the density of Indivisible contacts had a positive and statistically significant relationship ($\beta = 2.2$; $p < 0.01$). To get a sense of the substantive magnitude of these effects, we used these model coefficients, and each county's level of organizational capacity and vote totals to provide a back-of-the-envelope estimate of the number of O'Rourke votes attributable to these groups. To do this, we calculated each county's counterfactual share of Democratic votes as a proportion of registered voters if there were zero Indivisible contacts and zero Campaign Offices in the county and compared this share with the actual amounts. We did this by subtracting each county's actual level of Democratic support by its levels of organizational density multiplied by the organization's estimated marginal effect on votes. Then we multiplied this difference by the county's number of registered voters to calculate each county's number of votes attributable to Campaign Offices and Indivisible contacts and summed this number over all counties to produce a statewide estimate. This exercise provides evidence of a meaningful, though modest, electoral effect of these groups. About 32,400 O'Rourke votes were attributable to the density of campaign offices and about 9,200 votes were attributable to Indivisible presence. Though the 2018 midterm election was widely seen as a referendum on the President, local organizing still played an important role. And Indivisible contacts, despite their overlap with O'Rourke's volunteer network, still had an independent effect on votes. Collectively, these two organized efforts added about half a percentage point to O'Rourke's vote share.

LEGACIES OF O'ROURKE'S 2018 CAMPAIGN

O'Rourke's impressive performance marked an important turn in Texas politics. In 2013, Battleground Texas promised to make Texas politically competitive by treating it like one—investing the time and resources into candidate recruitment, registration, and mobilization that the party does in other competitive places. After Democratic setbacks in 2014, including the hugely underwhelming 2014 Democratic gubernatorial election, hopes of realizing battleground status in Texas seemed bleak.

Yet just four years later, O'Rourke's 2018 Senate campaign seems to have reignited hopes for a Democratic revival in Texas. This may ultimately bode well for the success of Democratic candidates in Texas. Cruz's narrow margin of victory—about 215,000 votes—falls well within the reach of an expanding electorate. Noting that 400,000 people registered to vote in the state between March and October 2018, and 300,000 high-schoolers turn 18 each year in the state, Oscar Silva of Battleground Texas argued that “We can register that gap.”⁵⁰ O'Rourke's strong performance may help convert these favorable demographic trends into political gains for Democrats by building organizational capacity in Texas—strong candidates and trained staff—to mobilize these new voters. Because O'Rourke poured his massive fundraising hauls into hiring staff, his campaign apparatus was enormous—with more than 800 people on payroll and 25,000 volunteers—compared to 18 people on staff for Ted Cruz, who relied on Greg Abbott's large organization of staff and volunteers.⁵¹ The campaign leaves behind this infrastructure and network of activists, many of whom first became politically involved with O'Rourke's campaign.⁵²

Down the ballot, Democrats made gains in the state's major metropolitan areas. Democrats flipped 12 state house seats and 2 state senate seats, mostly in Dallas, Austin, and Houston.⁵³ Democrats also flipped 2 Congressional seats. Colin Allred unseated incumbent Peter

Sessions in a Dallas area seat by just under 18,000 votes in a race where he received 52.3% of the vote. Lizzie Fletcher of the Houston area unseated incumbent John Culberson with 52.5% of the vote, a lead of just over 12,000 votes in a longtime Republican seat previously held by George H. W. Bush.⁵⁴ Democrats also made major gains in county offices in the state's major cities and suburbs. In Harris County, Democrats flipped more than 50 judgeships from Republican incumbents; 17 of those successful challengers were black women.⁵⁵

While anti-Trump sentiment helped Democrats everywhere, the O'Rourke campaign also shares some credit in these downballot successes. As a Democratic candidate for county clerk noted, "My race of course is at the bottom of a very long ballot, so this excitement that [Beto] generates ... is turning into voter engagement. And that has resulted in more people being interested in all levels of government." The founder of a Democratic communications firm said in October before the election "The fact that Beto has run a good campaign, he's remained competitive, and he's communicated through the end, that has helped all Democrats." A candidate for state house spoke about the campaign's willingness to help smaller campaigns. "They've been very gracious about sharing the stage with ... people who get little to no exposure."⁵⁶

Because so many first time Democrats won their races in 2018, O'Rourke's campaign may have boosted the candidate quality of Democratic candidates in Texas; in his concession speech, O'Rourke himself declared that "there are so many great candidates who are going to come out of this campaign whose work I look forward to supporting and following and cheering on." Fielding candidates with previous experience in elected office is important as such candidates tend to cultivate more votes and fundraise more effectively.⁵⁷ The absence of high-quality candidates for many decades impeded Republican Realignment in the American South.⁵⁸

Since Republicans have gained control, Texas Democrats have suffered from relatively lackluster candidates running for statewide office: “whoever was willing to run”—and for many local races no Democrat would run at all.⁵⁹ *The Dallas Morning News* wrote that the competitive 2020 Democratic Primary to challenge Senator Cornyn “signals that Democrats are entering a new era in Texas politics. They don't have to find sacrificial lambs to fill out candidate slates.”⁶⁰ By helping to elect dozens of downballot candidates to office on his coattails, and by restoring the hope that victory in statewide office is a reasonable possibility, O’Rourke may have left a legacy of higher-quality Democratic candidates going forward.

All these encouraging signs—a massive increase in turnout, narrow defeat in a statewide race for Senate, wins in numerous local and state legislative contests, and competitive performances in several Congressional races—have encouraged Democrats to renew their efforts in Texas, eyeing in particular the six Republican incumbents who held onto their Congressional seats by less than 5% of the vote. Starting just a few months after the 2018 election, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee made new investments to develop Democratic strength in Texas. In March 2019, the DCCC announced that field organizers would set-up shop in the suburbs of San Antonio, Austin, Houston, and Dallas. In April, the group opened a new satellite office in Austin with 8 full-time staffers, trying to replicate in 2020 the Democratic sweep of Congressional seats in California’s Orange County in 2018. Three of the six Republicans eyed by Democrats in 2020 have districts in metropolitan Austin. Cheri Bustos, chairwoman of the DCCC, explained: “When it comes to places where House Democrats can go on offense, it doesn’t get any bigger than Texas.”⁶¹ Republicans are taking these Democratic challenges seriously by recruiting candidates to challenge new Democratic incumbents and using the threat of new Democratic outreach as a fundraising tool.

O'Rourke's performance also portends a more competitive 2020 Presidential election in Texas. Surveys of the Texas electorate suggest that certain 2020 Democratic Presidential aspirants—including Biden and O'Rourke—could compete with Trump for the state's 38 electoral votes.⁶² Texas is also becoming competitive grounds within the Democratic presidential primary. In one May weekend, five “high-profile Democrats” and Presidential candidates visited in an attempt to raise money and gain support from the state.⁶³ In an interview with Rachel Maddow O'Rourke himself noted, “Texas and its 38 Electoral College votes have been unlocked. They are in contention, and we will have a seat at the table.”⁶⁴

While O'Rourke's 254 County campaign strategy was an important feature of his bid, its merits were not in persuading rural voters. His performance among those constituencies was worse than that of other statewide Democrats—such as Lt. Governor candidate Mike Collier—and much worse than less successful Democrats of recent memory. Instead, this strategy helped O'Rourke establish his credibility as a candidate, cultivate a likeable and energetic persona, and attract a deluge of press coverage. His listening tours in small-town Texas, broadcast nationwide through constant livestreams on social media, showcased O'Rourke's authenticity and earnest outreach to audiences both in Texas and around the country. The campaign was thus both quintessentially local and national, as were its consequences: impacting downballot races for statehouse and Congress, reviving political competition in statewide Texas races, and setting the stage for O'Rourke's Presidential ambitions.

However, O'Rourke's performance did not come out of a vacuum. He benefited from the intense efforts of organizations and individuals working to expand and mobilize a sleepy electorate in Texas; indeed, Texas had been trending Democratic in Presidential elections in recent cycles, and by 2016 the vote in Texas was as close as in traditional swing states like Iowa

and Ohio. Many years of organizing by groups like Battleground Texas and the Texas Organizing Project had helped set the stage for his rise through registration and activation of low-income and minority citizens. More recently, the sharp reaction to Trump, including the rise of Indivisible and other resistance groups, also helped spur Democratic votes in 2018 and boost O'Rourke's fundraising. O'Rourke in turn poured these monies into a massive campaign apparatus, helping deepen political activism and experience in Texas. O'Rourke was undoubtedly a strong candidate. But the organizational analyses employed here show how organized efforts to make Texas competitive precede and outlast him.

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