Mobilizing Candidates: Political Actors Strategically Shape The Candidate Pool With Personal Appeals[*]

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Abstract

Politicians' personal beliefs and backgrounds strongly influence politics and policy. But why do individuals with particular beliefs and backgrounds tend to run for office and become politicians? This paper argues that parties and interest groups strategically shape the candidate pool from which voters choose by mobilizing certain individuals to run for office, much like they strategically shape the electorate by mobilizing like-minded individuals to vote. Supporting this view, I first unearth decades of previously disparate evidence suggesting that candidate mobilization efforts are widespread. I then present results from an experiment embedded in an actual candidate mobilization effort that finds encouragement to run for office can meaningfully increase interest in candidacy. Implications and opportunities for further research are discussed.

Politicians' personal backgrounds and beliefs powerfully shape politics and policy: legislators often vote their personal preferences (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Washington 2008) and dedicate greater effort to causes they find personally important (e.g., Hall 1996; Broockman 2013; Mendez 2014). But why do legislators and candidates tend to have the personal backgrounds and beliefs that they do? This paper argues that party and interest group elites strategically shape the candidate pool by encouraging like-minded individuals to run for office, much like these elites strategically shape the electorate by encouraging like-minded individuals to vote. What political elites personally believe is good public policy may thus reflect resource imbalances in the process by which individuals with particular views tend to be encouraged to run for office.

In this paper I first unearth a nascent body of qualitative and survey evidence that suggests political actors routinely recruit candidates for office with personal appeals. I then present a novel experiment testing whether such appeals can increase interest in office in a field setting. I conclude by considering implications of conceptualizing candidate entry through the lens of strategic mobilization and directions for further research.

How Often Do Elites Mobilize Candidates? Uncovering A Nascent Body of Evidence

Before the 2006 Congressional elections, Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chair Rahm Emanuel made his "first step" the "recruit[ment of] good candidates" (Bendavid 2007). As Rep. Wasserman-

Schultz put it, "strategizing about how to get top-tier candidates into [Congressional] races" consumed Emanuel for months: Emanuel enlisted dozens of sitting Members of Congress to help identify promising candidates in their regions, meticulously researched potential candidates' backgrounds in order to determine "the right angle to reel [them] in," and then relentlessly pressured these targets to run (Bendavid 2007).[1]

Emanuel's obsession with recruitment appears far from unique among political elites. When more than two dozen scholars over the last several decades have gone into the field to investigate various other political phenomenon, they have routinely noted political elites strategically mobilizing candidates. These observations can be found in many literatures, including older case studies of particular regions (e.g., Sorauf 1963) and recent accounts of other phenomenon, such as Rozell and Wilcox's (1996) investigation into the Christian right, Masket's (2009) description of informal party organizations in California politics, and Galvin (2010)'s study of Presidential party-building.[2]

These qualitative accounts typically describe party and interest group leaders encouraging individuals to run with whom they have close personal

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[1] See also Barbour et al. (2013, p. 32) for explicit discussion by Republican party elites of their party's current extensive recruitment efforts and the need to directtthese recruitment resources in various new strategic directions (e.g., the need to recruit women and minorities to run in order to influence the party's image among female and minority voters).

[2] See Seligman (1961); Sorauf (1963); Williams and Adrian (1963); Snowiss (1966); Seligman et al. (1974); Thurber (1976); Lipset (1983); Jacobson (1985); Fowler and McClure (1989, p. 53); Hertzke (1994); Layzell and Overby (1994); Rozell and Wilcox (1996); Niven (1998); Rozell (2000); Jewell and Morehouse (2000, p. 55); Moncrief et al. (2001); Sanbonmatsu (2003, 2006b); Lawless and Fox (2005, 2010); Bendavid (2007); Sanbonmatsu et al. (2009); Masket (2009); Galvin (2010); Masket (2011); Crowder-Meyer (2011); Masket and Shor (2011); and Mann and Ornstein (2012, p. 9).

relationships and believe are like-minded. These close relationships appear to serve two crucial roles. First, these relationships allow recruiters to assess potential candidates' personal beliefs and abilities with confidence. For example, union leaders may sensibly expect that a person who has dedicated tremendous time and effort to the union's political efforts for the last decade would remain committed to advancing unions' political priorities if elected. In addition, personal relationships appear to facilitate mobilization: recruiters often stress to potential candidates that their group or party "needs" them to run, consistent with literature that personal appeals can compel even substantial actions (e.g., Christensen et al. 1998).

These accounts sit at odds with the discipline's longstanding view of why individuals run for office. Scholars' "dominant assumption" has been that people seek office because of pre-existing "intense desire for political power" and "extraordinary...personal political ambition" (for reviews see Fowler and McClure 1989; Fowler 1993; Moncrief 1999). Within this traditional framework, variation in personal "utility of officeholding" and the political opportunities available for satisfying such ambition principally explain who seeks office (Schlesinger 1966; Prewitt and Nowlin 1969; Black 1972).[3]

Convinced that personal ambition principally explains candidacy decisions, as Maisel (2001) reviews, scholars have generally thought parties

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[3] Individual-level factors and personal experiences undoubtedly play a large role in informing candidacy decisions - see Lawless (2012) and Lundin et al. (2013) for exemplary work extending this tradition. This paper merely contends that elite strategic mobilization *also* plays a large role in the process, just as voter turnout reflects both individual differences and elite strategy.

and interest groups must play "a limited role at best" in recruiting candidates as they lack selective incentives for inducing candidacy among those not otherwise intending to run.[4] Recently, research on women's candidacies has accumulated evidence at odds with this skepticism and found that elite encouragement appears to play an important role in the dearth of female candidates (e.g., Niven 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2003, 2006a, 2006b; Lawless and Fox 2005, 2010; Crowder-Meyer 2011; Bjarnegard 2013; Preece et al. 2014). Such literature has consistently found that self-reports of recruitment are strongly associated with interest in office.

A heretofore-unappreciated body of survey research also suggests that encouragement to run for office is not only impactful but also extremely common. I performed a thorough review of extant elite surveys and uncovered 24 studies that have asked candidates (potential recruitees) and party leaders (potential recruiters) about recruitment. Table 1 presents these surveys' sampling frames, sample sizes, and findings about recruitment's prevalence.

[TABLE 1]

When researchers ask political candidates and officeholders why or when they decided to run for office, a *majority* consistently report that encouragement to do so from others played the most important role. In five

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[4] See also Rohde (1979), Jacobson and Kernell (1981), Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (1987), Kazee (1994), and Siavelis and Morgenstern (2008). See Fowler (1993) and Moncrief (1999) for excellent reviews of this literature. A large literature in European and Latin American politics research has considered internal party processes that determine which candidates to nominate, but this literature uses the term "recruitment" in a broader sense and does not generally consider mobilization (Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008).

surveys where this statistic is not directly available (denoted with an asterisk) the results are still consistent, with having been asked to run the modal explanation for candidacy or the factor most positively associated with interest in running.

Most party leaders also report recruiting for offices at all levels, including for Congress and state executive office. Not only do candidates consistently report being recruited by existing elites, those existing elites also consistently report doing such recruiting.

To summarize, a sizable nascent body of qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that candidate recruitment efforts are widespread and significant. In such recruitment, party and interest group elites appear to use personal appeals to strategically encourage individuals to run for office whose candidacies would advance their goals, much like how they mobilize like-minded members of the public to vote in order to shape the electorate (Gerber and Green 2000).

Can Personal Appeals Increase Interest In Running For Office? A Field Experiment

Many officeholders and elites claim that recruitment is widespread. However, similar to once-common skepticism that voters could really be mobilized without selective incentives, scholars have been dubious that personal appeals alone could lead individuals to undertake such costly behaviors. As Maisel (2001) reviews, scholars have long doubted that recruitment could spur an individual to run as would-be recruiters have "few

incentives" to offer prospective recruits (see also Cox and Katz 2002; Carson et al. 2007).

The experiment puts this skepticism more directly to the test by examining whether personal appeals can tangibly increase interest in candidacy, as qualitative evidence has suggested. The experiment randomized the presence of personal encouragement to run for office in an actual candidate recruitment effort, the first field experiment on candidate recruitment.

In the experiment, CREDO Action, an American liberal political interest group with approximately 3.5 million members,[5] sent appeals to run for office to 99,935 of its most active members via email. The skeleton text of this message is in Box 1. CREDO Action informed every recipient about a project by a separate organization, the New Organizing Institute, to support new candidates for office. The underlined text in Box 1 was a hyperlink and, if clicked, brought participants to the New Organizing Institute's website where they could learn more about running for office, browse offices to run for, and agree to run for an office.

<div align="center">[BOX 1]</div>

The emails promised all recipients material political "resources" to run but varied the presence of personal encouragement to run. The treatments are shown in Table 2. Emails in the 'Additional Personal Encouragement' conditions provided explicit personal encouragement of the kind that the

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[5] CREDO Action is a US liberal political organization that mobilizes its members, usually via e-mail, to sign petitions to, call, and attend events pressuring elected officials and other elites. See www.credoaction.com.

qualitative evidence suggested recruiters do, stressing to potential candidates that their own candidacy was needed or that the group believed in the recipient's ability to be a successful elected official.

[TABLE 2]

To measure interest in office, the dependent variables are 1) opening the email[6] (after reading the subject line), 2) clicking the link "if you're interested in running for office…" to learn more about running (after reading the text), and 3) committing to the New Organizing Institute to "run for local office in 2012" (after visiting NOI's website and learning more). (See below for comments about generalizability of these outcomes.)

To appreciate the relevance of the treatment and outcomes for the possibility that candidates can be mobilized, recall that traditional explanations for candidacy attribute interest in office to ex ante idiosyncratic personal differences in political ambition; in this view, anyone who might run for office would be expected to jump at the email's offer of support (e.g., Black 1972). By contrast, personal encouragement is typically not expected to increase interest in office as it does not represent a material selective incentive (see Maisel 2001 for review). If this view of candidacy were correct, the share of those who showed interest in office in the experiment should remain similar across the conditions varying the presence of personal encouragement.

Table 3 presents the differences in interest in office by treatment condition. Recipients were significantly more likely to open the email, click

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[6] Standard technologies in email marketing allow measuring who opens an email.

the link to learn more about running, and pledge to run after receiving

emails in the personal encouragement conditions. Overall, 25.3% of

recipients opened the emails, but emails with subject lines employing

personal encouragement to run for office were 17% more likely to be

opened. The number of subjects who chose to learn more about running in

the personal encouragement conditions also increased by 47% compared to

the political support conditions. Finally, a total of 346 people promised the

New Organizing Institute "to run for local office in 2012" after receiving the

appeal, though the share of people who did so differed greatly by treatment:

56% more people in the personal encouragement conditions agreed to run

for office than in the political support conditions.[7] In summary, the addition of

personal encouragement appeared to have a large effect on recipients'

interest in running for office as measured by their decisions to learn more

about running and promises to run.

[TABLE 3]

[FIGURE 1]

What do these different reactions to email messages about a candidate

recruitment program say about candidate recruitment more broadly?

Propitious for the generalizability of the results, the setting and

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[7] The New Organizing Institute attempted to track whether the individuals who agreed actually ran for office and found that 20 of them did, 8 in the political support conditions and 12 in the encouragement conditions. Anecdotally, more individuals plan to run for office in future election cycles, although such promises should be interpreted with caution. This difference is not statistically significant but the confidence interval associated with them is large. These differences should also be interpreted with caution because running for office was only observable conditional on making the promise to the New Organizing Institute to run. However, that 6% of those who promised to run for office actually did so in the 2012 election cycle demonstrates that the individuals who indicated interest in running in the experiment were on average much more serious about candidacy than typical individuals.

population were highly naturalistic: participants were not aware they were being studied and are politically active group members of the variety that elites typically recruit. Moreover, the decisions to open the email and gather more information about running on the organization's website are behavioral outcomes less susceptible to biases in self-reported measures. By contrast, existing experimental work relies on student samples (e.g., Kanthak and Woon 2013) and nearly all work relies exclusively on self-reported interest in office and strictly observational designs (e.g., Maestas et al. 2006; Lawless 2012).

The design also has several shortcomings that can be addressed in future research. First, the treatment and context of the experiment – encouraging phrases in an email – clearly differ from real-world analogues like protracted exhortations from Rahm Emanuel, and thus the experiment is more equipped to speak to the presence of a psychological mechanism than estimate the absolute magnitude of other appeals. Moreover, as the key dependent variables in the analysis could only be gathered in the context of an email message about recruitment, the study lacks a true "control group" that received no contact at all. In these ways the experiment is more akin to a laboratory or survey experiment that attempts to isolate the existence of a particular mechanism among a population of interest. Future work can and should build on these findings and uncover the absolute efficacy of other recruitment tactics.

In summary, the experiment attempted to evaluate longstanding

doubts that personal encouragement could increase interest in office, doubts that have left many scholars dubious that recruiters could mobilize candidates for office as they lack material selective incentives. The results show that personal appeals can increase interest in office in a real world setting, consistent with the view that recruiters are able to mobilize candidates.

Discussion

Parties and organized interest groups are typically conceptualized as the creatures of ambitious candidates and politicians (e.g., Aldrich 1995) who create political organizations to help them satisfy their personal political ambitions (Prewitt and Nowlin 1969; Black 1972). This paper suggested an inversion of this perspective: many candidates and politicians may be the creation of parties and organized groups who strategically mobilize like-minded individuals to run (Bawn et al. 2012).

Consistent with this perspective, this paper unearthed decades of qualitative and survey evidence documenting that elites consistently report encouraging candidates to run for office and that candidates for office consistently report having been recruited. Scholars have nevertheless long been dubious that parties and interest groups could stimulate individuals to run without selective incentives (Maisel 2001). An experiment embedded in an actual candidate recruitment effort provided a unique test of this hypothesis by isolating whether personal encouragement to run increased interest in seeking office and found that it did. These results added further

support to the notion that elites can increase interest in office with personal appeals, potentially allowing them to strategically shape the candidate pool just as they strategically shape the electorate.

Conceptualizing candidate entry as a process of *strategic mobilization* practiced by rational political elites – and not simply reflecting candidates' idiosyncratic personal differences – may offer a novel lens for understanding politics and politicians. For example, as groups with resource advantages are likely better able to screen for and mobilize candidates, recruitment may be a conduit by which the wealthy's preferences are translated into policy (e.g., Bartels 2008; Gilens 2009; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Carnes 2014). Candidate recruitment could also have an important role in how legislative parties succeed in maintaining discipline (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 1993; van Houweling 2013) if parties can screen for and mobilize candidates who are likelier to be loyal partisans if elected, something qualitative evidence has suggested Republican lawmakers actively do (Hacker and Pierson 2005). Recruiters' personal biases could also have dramatic consequences on the personal backgrounds of the candidates voters have the opportunity to choose between (e.g., Niven 1998; Carnes 2014). More scholars should follow political actors' lead in attending to candidate recruitment's potentially significant implications like these.

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Table 1. Review of Findings from Elite Surveys

Surveys of Candidates and Politicians (Potential Targets of Recruitment)				
Study	*Respondents and Context*	*N*	*Finding*	*Recruitment Most Important?*
Rosenzweig (1957)	Candidates for local office in western MA	16	44% ran because "it was their own idea"	Yes
Wahlke et al. (1962)	State legislators in NJ, OH, CA, & TN	417	61% did not have the idea to run on their own	Yes
Bowman and Boynton (1966)	Local officials in MA and NJ	138	60% decide to run because they were "asked by the party"	Yes
Watts (1968)	Candidates for local offices in IN	31	74% run because they were "initially approached by others"	Yes
Prewitt (1970)	City councilmen in the San Francisco Bay Area	431	68% attribute their "political recruitment" to "at least one person"	Yes
Huckshorn and Spencer (1971)	US Congressional candidates in 1970s	238	66% run because they were asked by "party leaders"	Yes
Seligman et al. (1974)	Candidates for OR state legislature	109	51% are "reluctants" who had to be encouraged	Yes
Barron et al. (1989)	UK local councilors	65	majority asked to run by others	Yes
Kazee and Thornberry (1990)	Congressional candidates in 1982	36	61% decided to run on their own	No, but wide confidence interval
Helander (1997)	Candidates for Dutch parliament	111	"Request by certain group" modal reason for running	Yes*
Leijenaar and Niemoller (1997)	Candidates for Netherlands parliament	Not given	"Most important reason" to run is that was "asked to be a candidate"	Yes*
McAllister (1997)	Candidates for Australian local and national office	388	"I was asked to run by the local party" most frequently named reason for running	Yes*
Moncrief, Squire, and Jewell (2001)	US state legislators	464	32% say it was "their own idea" to run; majority "recruited" or "persuaded" to run	Yes
Maestas, et al. (2006)	US state legislators	597	"Contacted about running" most positively associated with running of all factors studied	Yes*
Sanbonmatsu, Carroll, and Walsh (2009)	US state legislators	1280	66% say their run was "suggested" by others, 33% say "it was entirely my idea to run"	Yes
Rallings et al. (2010)	UK local candidates	4646	67% run for office because they were asked by others	Yes
Fox and Lawless (2010)	US "candidate eligibility pool" e.g., lawyers,	1538	"Recruited to run by at least one political actor" most positively associated with	Yes*

	educators		running of all factors studied	
Broockman et al. (2013)	US state legislative candidates	1,907	54% say that "someone encourag[ing them] to run" was "especially important in [their] decision to run"	Yes

Surveys of Party Leaders (Potential Agents of Recruitment)

Study	Respondents and Context	N	Finding	Majority Recruit?
Roback (1974)	Republican county party chairmen in VA and WV	158	59% report recruiting	Yes
Gibson et al. (1983)	US state party chairpersons, past and present	289	65% recruit for state legislature	Yes
Gibson et al. (1985)	US county party chairpersons	3989	63% recruit for Congress; 74% recruit for state legislature; 70% recruit for county offices; 44% recruit for city offices	Yes
Aldrich (2000)	US state party chairs	65	55% "active" in recruiting for Congress; 78% for state legislature; 52% for governor	Yes
Sanbonmatsu (2006a)	US state legislative and party leaders	127	81% of legislative party leaders and 75% of state party leaders "very" or "fairly" active in "recruiting candidates for their party"	Yes
Crowder-Meyer (2011)	US county chairpersons	2326	80% report recruiting	Yes

Table 2. Experimental Treatments

Treatment	Political Support Conditions		Additional Personal Encouragement Conditions	
	"Help Running"	"You Can Win"	"You'd Be Great"	"We Want You"
Subject Line	Get help running for elected office. Seriously.	Run for office and you can get elected. Seriously.	You'd be a great elected official. Seriously.	We want you to run for elected office. Seriously.
First Treatment Line	There's help for people like you who want to run for elected office.	All over America, people like you are running for office -- and winning.	You would be a great elected official.	We want you to run for elected office. Seriously.
Second Treatment Line	Now there's help for people like you who are interested in running for elected office.	When people like you run for office, they can get elected.	People like you make for fantastic elected officials.	We think you should run for office.

Notes: The Table shows the lines that were spliced into the corresponding sections of the script shown in Box 1.

Table 3. Open, Click, and Run Agreement Rates by Email Treatment

Treatment (Sample Size)	*Dependent Variable*			
	% opened	% clicked among openers	% clicked among all recipients	% agreed "to run for local office in 2012"
Political Support Conditions				
"Help running" (N=24982)	22.35 (0.26)	5.64 (0.31)	1.68 (0.08)	0.23 (0.03)
"You can win" (N=24981)	24.35 (0.27)	5.77 (0.30)	1.90 (0.09)	0.31 (0.04)
Personal Encouragement Conditions				
"You'd be great" (N=24982)	27.37 (0.28)	8.20 (0.33)	2.95 (0.11)	0.36 (0.04)
"We want you" (N=24990)	27.03 (0.28)	8.58 (0.34)	2.93 (0.11)	0.48 (0.04)
Effect of encouragement in percentage points	3.85*** (0.27)	2.68*** (0.32)	1.15*** (0.09)	0.15*** (0.03)
Percent increase in action due to encouragement	17%	47%	64%	56%

Notes: *** = p < 0.001.

Box 1. Text of Recruitment Email

From: Becky Bond, CREDO Action **Subject: [Treatment subject.]** Dear [subject's first name], **[First treatment line.]** I'm writing because you're one of our best activists. We think more people like you should be holding elected office, instead of those who are beholden to special interests. **[Second treatment line.]** That's why I want to tell you about a project from our friends at the New Organizing Institute. It's called the Candidate Project. The Candidate Project helps people like you learn about local board seats and other public offices — and, it provides resources to help people like you run for these offices, including tools, trainings, and connections to others who are ready to offer a helping hand. There are more than half a million elected positions in our country — that's more than 500,000 people who help decide what children learn in schools, which industries move into our towns, and whether to treat us differently based on how we look or who we love. The Candidate Project can connect you to the resources to run a successful campaign for offices like these. Your activism has already helped make a positive change. Now, I hope you'll consider taking the next step: **if you're interested in learning more about running for office and how the Candidate Project can help you do so, let them know here.** 2012 is a critical year. Thanks for everything you are doing to work for social change. Becky Bond, Political Director CREDO Mobile

Figure 1. Percentage Clicking "If you're interested in running for office…" and Ultimately Agreeing To Run, By Treatment Group