

“Political Party Contacting in the 2024 Election”

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It is fair to say that political parties are no longer central to the American electoral system. As Herrnson (2013) notes, “... a candidate-center system was brought about by legal, demographic, and technological changes in American society and reforms instituted by the parties themselves,” (p. 135). Herrnson goes on to describe the efforts the American political parties made to strengthen themselves, becoming institutions with robust capacity to perform election-related and party-building functions as well as hold influence over other participants in the electoral system. Hershey and Burden (2025) characterize the now-stronger parties as “service parties,” serving candidates in a candidate-centered system. Parties assist candidates through training candidates and their campaign staff, conducting issue and voter research, assisting with ad development and direct mail production (Hershey and Burden 2025), and by providing financial support through direct, coordinated, and independent expenditures (Brox 2013).

Indeed, the mobilizing function that political parties perform is arguably one of the most important, as it fulfills the parties’ goal of winning elections (Epstein 1986) and serves the needs of the candidates for which the parties were created (Aldrich 1995). Parties mobilize voters through a variety of means: advertising, contacting via telephone and mail, and (especially) through canvassing and get-out-the-vote efforts conducted in person. Such mobilization has, in the service-party era, focused on party supporters (Conway 1993); this serves the candidates by assuring them that the partisans likely to vote for them are mobilized while leaving (only) the task of persuading undecided voters to the candidates’ campaigns.¹

The impact of party contacting is multifaceted. While the immediate goal of party contacting is to get the targeted individual to turn out to vote (Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994), research has also found that party contacting can be critical to mobilizing partisans to engage in other forms of campaign activity (Wielhouwer 1999) as well as engaging in information diffusion, informal persuasion, and a secondary mobilization process (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992).

In this paper I assess party contacting in the 2024 election. After reviewing recent scholarship on party contacting, I describe the extent of party contacting in 2024 and how

¹ For a counterview, see Panagououlos (2020) for an assessment of recent shifts among candidate campaigns from persuasion to base mobilization strategies.

it relates to the previous two elections. I then address *who* gets contacted, highlighting the demographic and attitudinal factors that characterize those likely to receive party contacting. Next, I assess the impact of party contacting on its recipients, focusing not only on turnout but also on engagement in other campaign activities. I conclude this paper with a discussion of the impact of party contacting in a polarized electoral system.

Previous Work on Party Contacting

Research on party contacting followed the revival of party organizations in the wake of reforms in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout the 1980s scholars charted the strengthening of party organizations at the national (Cotter and Bibby 1980), state (Gibson et al. 1983), and local (Gibson et al. 1985) levels. As a result, others began paying attention to the outreach efforts of these newly re-invigorated party organizations.

Estimates from the early 1990s suggested that political parties contacted twenty to twenty-five percent of the electorate, though the trend over time revealed that 1990 was a low point in party contacting following a relative high point in 1982 (Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994). Subsequent research revealed that party contacting fell to an even-lower level in 1992, though the rate of contact improved in both the 1996 and 2000 elections to roughly thirty percent of the electorate (Gershtenson 2003). Throughout the 2000s party contacting continued to increase, with parties contacting between thirty-five and forty-four percent of the electorate between 2000 and 2012 (Panagopoulos 2015).

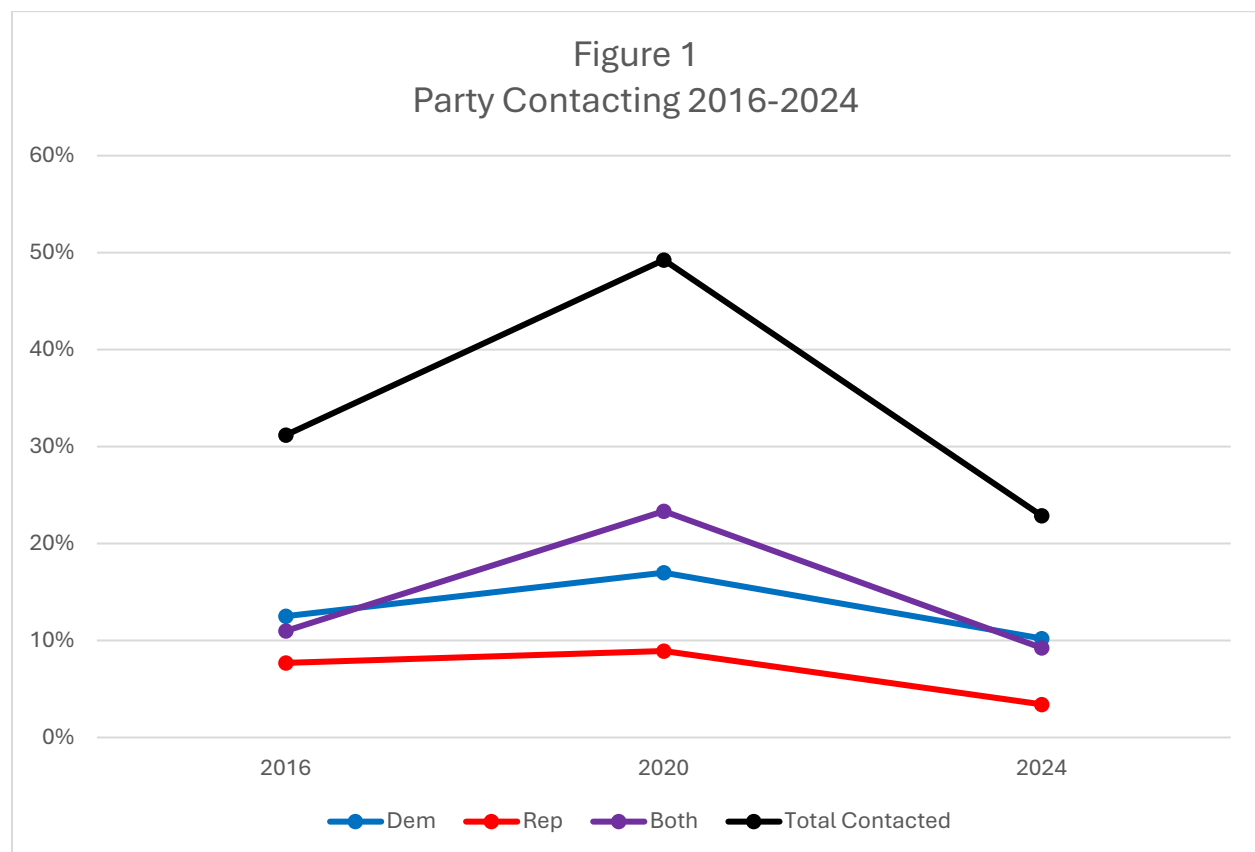
Research also spoke to *who* made up the increasing numbers of people being contacted by parties and campaigns. Gershtenson (2003) found that party contacting focused on partisans, individuals with higher underlying propensity for participation (richer, older, more educated, previous voters), and those in a social position to influence others (cf. Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992). Given that the goal of party contacting is to help the parties, and their candidates, to win elections, it follows that the recipients of party contacting are likely to be those most likely to vote for the party's candidates and to engage in other behavior helpful to the party, such as donating funds or volunteering for campaigns. Indeed, Schier (2009) argues that parties focus on specific constituencies, a "...small but potentially effective segment of the public..." (p. 104), identifying them through the use of polling and research and contacting them through modern communication methods such as telephones, direct mail, internet communication.

The effectiveness of party contacting has also been subject to evaluation. Research from the latter half of the twentieth century showed that those contacted were more likely to turn out, to donate, and to engage in other campaign activities such as wearing a political button, attending political meetings or rallies, working for political parties (Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994). Subsequent work assessed the impact of party campaigning not only in more recent elections, but also by method of contact. A study of

party contacting in Michigan in 2002 found that placing of door hangers and making telephone calls had small, but statistically significant, positive effects on turnout (Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006).

Party Contacting in Recent Elections

The general point of recent work on party contacting is that parties are contacting increasing numbers of individuals, those individuals are targeted based on specific demographic and attitudinal traits, and that party contact can have a positive impact on turnout and other election-oriented behavior. A review of party contacting in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 elections shows that some of those trends continue. To begin, Figure 1 shows the percentage of individuals contacted by political parties in the most recent three presidential elections.



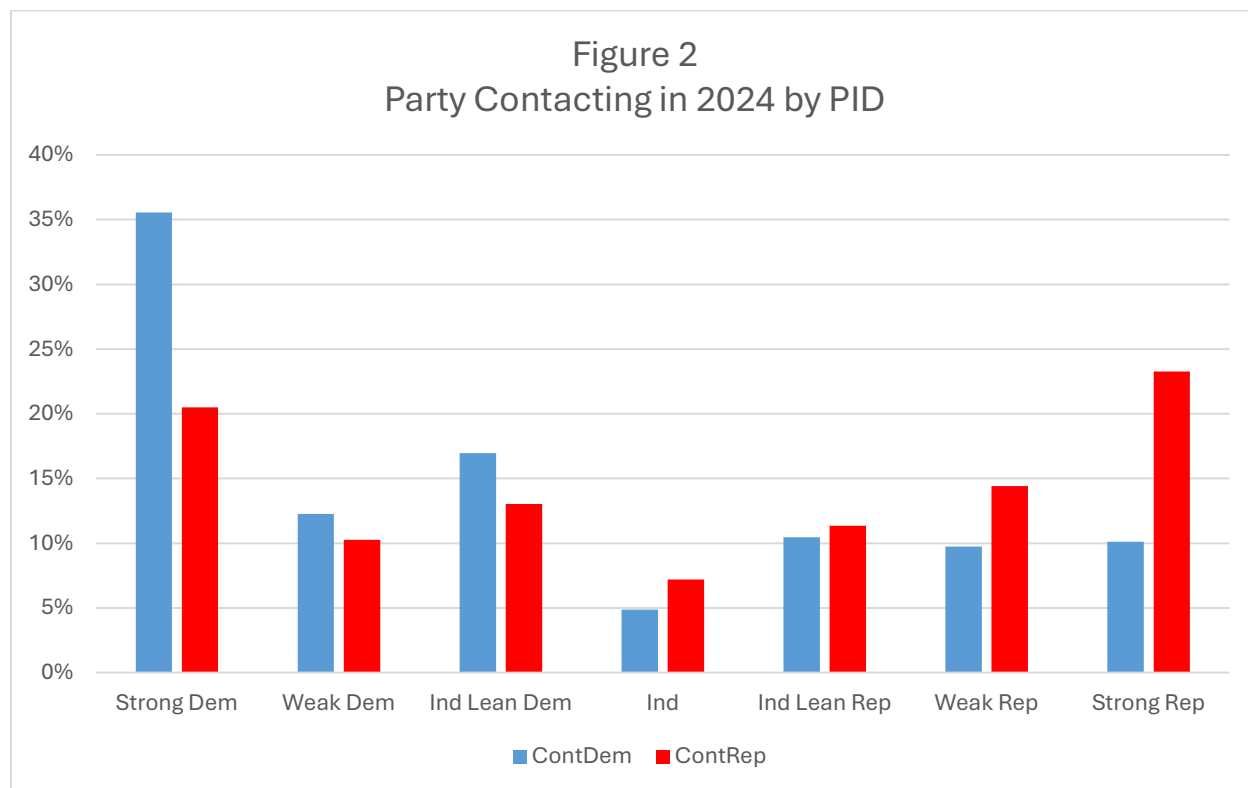
Source: American National Election Studies 2016, 2020, and 2024.

In line with earlier findings, political parties contacted between a quarter and a half of the electorate in the three most recent presidential elections. What is perhaps more surprising is the short-term trend. In 2016, the last pre-pandemic election, roughly a third

of the electorate received contact from the parties. This level increased to nearly half during the 2020 election in the midst of the pandemic, then receded to only a quarter of the electorate in 2024. In all three elections Democrats contacted a greater proportion of the electorate than did Republicans, though in 2020 a larger percentage (twenty-three percent) reported being contacted by both parties as opposed to the percentages being contacted by only the Democrats (seventeen percent) or Republicans (nine percent).

In some ways the trend makes sense, as the spike in contacting in 2020 likely reflects the high stakes of the election and the need for parties to inform voters of novel voting methods utilized in the midst of the pandemic. What is more perplexing, though, is the sizeable decline in contacting in 2024 as well as the large percentage of the electorate reporting being contacted by both parties; this latter point flies in the face of both conventional wisdom and previous findings that party contacting efforts should focus on mobilizing partisans.

To more fully capture the partisan breakdown of each party's contacting targets in 2024, Figure 2 shows the percentages of those contacted by both major parties separated by party identification.



Source: American National Election Studies 2024.

Here we see a clear differentiation in party contacting strategies. Democratic Party contacts in 2024 went primarily (sixty-five percent) to Democratic identifiers while Republican Party contacts in 2024 were targeted more evenly: forty-nine percent to Republican identifiers and forty-four percent to Democratic identifiers. In the case of both parties independents were least likely to be on the receiving-end of contacting efforts, with only five percent of Democratic contacts and seven percent of Republican contacts going to independents. One possible explanation for the difference is the unexpected nature of the Democratic presidential campaign; when President Joe Biden was replaced as the nominee with Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic Party may have felt the need to rally the base to support its new candidate. It is less clear if the finding for the Republican Party is a result of an intentional strategy to contact both Democrats and Republicans or a byproduct of the usage of less-well-targeted contacting methods that inadvertently reached a sizeable number of Democrats.

A couple of important differences between Democratic and Republican Party contacting are also evident in the traits of recipients. Table 1 presents data on the age, education, gender, and income profile of party contacting recipients.

Table 1 Traits of Recipient of Democratic and Republican Contacting			
Age	18-29	20%	20%
	30-59	51%	48%
	60 and above	30%	32%
Education	High school or less	30%	39%
	Bachelor's Degree or more	42%	40%
Gender	Man	45%	51%
	Woman	53%	47%
Income	(median)	\$100,000 - \$110,000	\$100,000 - \$110,000

Source: American National Election Studies 2024.

On one hand, the Republican and Democratic Party contacted similar types of people with respect to age and income. For both parties there was a tendency to contact older voters, with only twenty percent of those contacted being younger than thirty years old. Additionally, both parties similarly targeted those with higher incomes, with the median household income of contacted in 2024 falling between \$100,000 and \$110,000. These findings are in line with those of Gershtenson (2003).

Yet two important differences emerge for those contacted by the Republican and Democratic Parties in 2024. One relates to education, as Democrats were more likely to contact those with higher education (at least a bachelor's degree) while those receiving Republican contacts were equally likely to be either college graduates or to have a high school diploma or less education. The other key difference lies in the gender of those receiving contact, with Democrats clearly targeting women while Republicans targeted men, though with a smaller margin. This latter difference reflects the gender gap prominent in modern American politics (Gillion, Ladd, and Meredith 2020).

The Impact of Party Contacting in 2024

The Democratic and Republican Parties contact efforts were similar in some ways – both focused on older and higher-income voters – while differing in their targeting of partisans as well based on the education and gender of the recipients. The two parties also differed with respect to the vote choice preferences of those they targeted. While it is possible that the party contacting contributed causally to the decision for whom to vote, it is also possible (and perhaps more likely) that the parties attempted to contact those likely to vote for their party's presidential candidate.

Either way, if political parties are doing their job of working to win elections as well as serving the candidates running on their label, there should be a correlation between the voters receiving contact from a party and their voting behavior. To test this, I calculated correlation coefficients between being contacted by a party and voting for that party's presidential nominee in 2024 using American National Election Studies data. As expected, being contacted by a party is positively, and statistically significantly, associated with voting for that party's presidential candidate. For Democrats, the correlation between being contacted by the Democratic Party and a vote for Harris was .176 (sig. < .001). For Republicans, the correlation between being contacted by the Republican Party and a vote for Trump was .050 (sig. < .05). So while both parties seem to be targeting eventual partisan voters with their contacts, as with the evidence discussed in Figure 2, it seems the Democrats more strongly prioritized making contact with Democrats and eventual Harris voters while Republicans, either strategically or unintentionally, were not as sharply focused.

What is perhaps a bit more causally plausible is that party contacting should drive turnout. To assess the impact of party contacting in 2024, I estimated a basic turnout model that includes whether an individual was contacted by either party as well as several individual attributes known to be related both to turnout as well as to party contacting strategy. I estimated this model on 2024 American National Election Studies data using binary logit. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Logistic Regression Estimates of Turnout in 2024	
Contacted by a party	.876** (.162)
Strength of party identification	.671** (.058)
Gender (woman = 1)	-.112 (.116)
Education	.419** (.059)
Age	.036** (.003)
Income	.055** (.008)
constant	-3.862** (.266)
N	2894

** p < .01

Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

Nagelkerke R² = .326

X² = 577.374 Significance X² < .001

Source: American National Election Studies 2024.

While the Nagelkerke R² value suggests a moderate fit of the model to the dependent variable, it is reassuring to see that all of the variables except gender yield coefficients that one would expect. To wit, those with stronger party identification, more education, and those who are older and with higher income were more likely to turn out in 2024. And even when controlling for those individual-level factors, those who were contacted by a party were more likely to turn out.

Though turnout is the most important consideration for party contacting, as Wielhouwer (1999) points out, party contacting can also be useful for mobilizing individuals to engage in other sorts of electoral activity. To gauge the further impact of party contacting in 2024, I assessed the correlation between an individual being contacted by a party and whether that individual engaged in other activities to assist the party and its candidates.

First, I calculated the correlation coefficient between being contacted by a party and the number of days the individual reporting discussing politics with friends and family in the 2024 American National Election Studies. The correlation was both positive (.078) and statistically significant (sig. < .01). Whether causal or the result of smart targeting, this correlation suggests that parties continue to engage in what Huckfeldt and Sprague (1992) identify as mobilizing those who themselves will go on to mobilize others.

Next, I calculated the correlation coefficient between being contacted by a party and an index of campaign activity I created from six questions in the 2024 American National Election Studies. Respondents were asked if they engaged in the following six activities:

- Attend a meeting online
- Attend a meeting or rally in person
- Wear a campaign button or display a campaign sign
- Work for a party or candidate campaign
- Contribute to a candidate or candidates
- Contribute to a party

For each question I assigned a value of one if the respondent indicated doing the activity, thus producing an index that ranged from zero to six. The correlation between that index and whether the individual was contacted by a political party was both positive (.220) and statistically significant (sig. < .01). This finding in 2024 is in line with the Wielhouwer and Lockerbie (1994) finding from over thirty years ago that those contacted by the party will also engage in campaign activism.

Looking Ahead

Political Parties continued contacting voters in 2024 as they have in the recent past. While 2024 saw a decrease in contacting compared to four years prior, political parties managed to contact around a quarter of the electorate. Democrats focused more of their contacts on partisans while Republican contacts were more evenly split, but for both parties the profile of contacted individuals reflected a focus on those more likely to participate (older, higher income) and those more supportive of the party (women, higher education, and Harris voters for Democrats; men, high school education, and Trump voters for Republicans). Party contact was also associated with subsequent electoral behavior in 2024, with those receiving contact more likely to turn out to vote, more likely to speak to friends and family about politics, and more likely to engage in other forms of campaign activism like donating and working on campaigns.

Given that these findings are largely in line with previous work on party contacting, and the near-term future of American politics suggests a similar electoral context in 2028 and beyond, it is reasonable to think that these trends in party contacting will continue. The financial resources available to the parties continue to grow, and while costs grow as well, political parties will have the means necessary to reach a large swath of the electorate. Those contacted will likely remain targeted to those likely to participate and like to support the party, as polarization in the United States remains high and the competition for the White House and control of Congress remains tight.

Moving ahead, research on party contacting would benefit from additional data on these efforts. Surveys beyond the American National Election Studies should consider adding party contact questions; while there may be concerns about these data due to their nature as recollections on the part of the survey respondent, having data from multiple surveys/samples would help researchers to more precisely identify party contacting efforts. Furthermore, data from the parties themselves, whether quantitative data that reports on amounts and targets of party contacting or qualitative data based on interviews with party operatives would greatly enrich our understanding of these efforts; the availability of these data depend, of course, on the willingness of the parties themselves to make the data available.

Research on party contacting would also improve with information on the content of the messaging in party contacting. It's a presumption that a focus on partisans involves highly partisan messages or mobilization messages, but parties don't only contact partisans. It would help our understanding of these efforts if researchers could analyze the content of the contacts, especially contacts with independents, to see if parties are trying to persuade people into supporting the party and its candidates.

A focus on independents would be important. It would be useful to study if parties continue to contact them or if they move further to a base mobilization strategy. Despite polarization there are still independents and voters who can float between the parties from election to election – if they are not contacted by the parties, it is not as though they fail to get information from other sources. Do the parties want to cede the informing and mobilizing of independents to other groups? If party contacting is solely a means of mobilizing likely supporters each election season, then perhaps the answer is yes. But if party contacting can play a role in bringing new people to the party, then maybe political parties need to contact beyond the partisans and likely participants to engage more fully the electorate in the midst of these polarized and competitive times.

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