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A Scientist's Guide to US Political Campaign Roles

FANCY COMMA, LLC

A Scientist's Guide to US Political Campaigns

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What you'll find here

This guide is meant to help scientists understand the campaign process and where their skills and expertise can be plugged in to improve political campaigns at all levels of government. This guide to political campaign roles is specific to political races in the United States. The information in this guide applies to both major political parties and can also apply to third parties. It is meant for scientists who are seeking to participate in political campaigns that have a large and dedicated infrastructure, such as a presidential campaign or a state-level coordinated campaign for many candidates. Smaller races, such as city council races, may not have all of these roles as dedicated departments, per se, but they will need to make sure that their smaller team of staff performs all of the functions outlined below.

By the way, in case you think that scientists are not involved in the political organizing: I met a chemist as well as a future doctor while organizing in the 2024 election cycle! I am also an independent neuroscience researcher. Did I mention that we helped elect a senator in this cycle? Scientists' quantitative and critical thinking skills come in handy, and their ability to rapidly explain science in a high-quality way can be useful for the many science and technology issues that candidates talk about when on the campaign trail.

So, anyway, let's get into it!

The US Political System, Which Funds Science, Is Not Run by Scientists

In the United States, our elected officials decide science funding, yet the process by which elected officials are chosen does not involve scientists directly. Therefore, there can be a mismatch between scientists and politicians, not only on this, but other science-related issues. Political involvement of scientists – individually, or even collectively, with groups of scientists banded together – can help create better outcomes for science as an enterprise. For people with a science background who have a passion for politics, political involvement can seem daunting.

One thing holding scientists back from participating in political campaigns is a lack of familiarity with politics. It can be tough to know where to start, and the terminology and

people (who often, but not always, have a political science or government background) can both be intimidating. That's why I wrote this guide to help scientists get involved in the political process. Because science does not belong to any particular party or group, this guide is meant to be nonpartisan and applicable to any political campaign in the US.

“Don't Agonize – Organize!”

As the saying goes, “don't agonize – organize!” In 10 years of working in academic science, I witnessed a lot of “agonizing” and not a lot of “organizing.” I chose to organize rather than agonize, and as an intern in Congress, got to witness first-hand how our elected government works. Now that I work in science communications and policy and am an independent neuroscience researcher, I see “agonizing” without “organizing” all the time on the internet. Complaining on social media doesn't elect people to office – but organizing does.

By and large, one must learn about the political world to be able to operate in it. I wrote this guide to empower scientists seeking to get involved in the political process to help them speak in the language of, and operate in, the political world so they can work towards the future they desire for our nation. That starts with understanding the political campaign structure and where scientists, who have unique skills and expertise, can plug in to make the greatest impact.

Of course, all political organizing happens within the context of a campaign, but it does not have to formally occur in a way that is sanctioned by the campaign itself...but it helps to work directly with a campaign.

How do political campaigns coincide with the US election cycle?

Here in the US, elections occur in cycles: we elect a president every four years, and every two years, we may have “midterm” races for the Congress – the Senate has elections for new senators every six years, and the House of Representatives members are up for re-election every two years. That's not even mentioning the people who leave office from time to time, prompting special elections. There are many reasons people organize that can also be related to world events.

Well-Managed and Grassroots Campaigns Are the Goal

The political campaign structure is well-managed from the “top-down” or [hierarchical](#), but good political campaigns are also “bottom-up” or [grassroots](#) – in other words, led by the people. The structure allows the campaign to operate and leverage grassroots support to win. Remember, elections are about the people. The end goal in a political campaign is to acquaint enough people with your candidate and talk about ways the candidate will help the constituents in a way that rallies public support. It’s quite a lot of work, but teamwork makes it possible.

It is never too early to start organizing for the next election. Successful campaigns reflect the voice of the people, but it is a long game. That’s part of the reason that even when a political cycle has ended, a new one may begin shortly thereafter. While motivations for political movements can be complex, politicians and voters alike can be quick to capitalize on such movements and harness the energy to mobilize voters. Scientists, both as concerned citizens and as people with specific skills and expertise relating to critical thinking, data analysis, and fact-based communications, have a huge role to play in many campaign domains.

Campaign Structure Varies throughout the Election Cycle

The campaign structure – and with it, the amount of time and energy working on a political campaign – can vary by where the US is in the election cycle.

At the start of an election cycle, the work may be to take stock of the campaign, the public sentiment, and start planning for more dedicated organizing. A year or more out, there may be people who start to plan events and canvass voters either in-person or via phone or text banking. There may be one or even a few paid staffers working in this phase as well as a handful of volunteers.

As election day nears, there’s a lot more work to do. The campaign hires more people and recruits volunteers, and the efforts go around-the-clock. If you are looking for a job when a campaign is ramping up, you may be able to find a full-time or part-time staff job, or an internship opportunity, by checking the website of your favorite candidate, or the jobs may be posted on the website of your national or state political party.

Time Invested Is Worth It, Even If You Lose

I used to be afraid of getting involved in “underdog” political campaigns, but having faced my fears, I have realized that putting your time and energy to a cause you support is always a worthwhile effort.

In fact, I have heard of organizers quitting high-powered corporate jobs just to organize. It's not enough to just quit your job, though – you have to know how the system works. While your work may not be paid or may involve long hours, the rewards for the time and energy invested make you, as a single person, more powerful than any Super PAC.

Working in politics requires significant time commitment, and towards election day, they may occupy a large part of your mental space. Just like in science, people working in the throes of political campaigns sacrifice sleep, time with friends, and more to help elect a candidate that they feel represents their hopes and ideals for a better nation.

Lastly, in my experience, there are three reasons to work on a political campaign, even if it is a losing one. Only one of the three reasons involve your candidate of choice winning.

The most obvious reason is to elect a specific candidate, though this can be tough to accomplish. Another reason is to help gain traction, visibility, or support for a given issue. In the 2024 election cycle, I volunteered for both Nikki Haley (a Republican) and Kamala Harris (a Democrat). While neither were successful, both elevated the conversation regarding toxic narratives about women in politics.

A third reason that applies to third-party candidates is to achieve a certain goal, such as to secure ballot access, even if your candidate doesn't win. In 2016, I worked on the Gary Johnson campaign in Oklahoma, which was able to gain a record-breaking number of votes, granting Libertarians ballot access in Oklahoma for several years to come (going on eight years so far).

The Different Roles in US Political Campaigns (And Ways Scientists Can Help)

Working on a political campaign involves ideals-driven work, long hours, and low pay. Does that sound familiar to any of my fellow scientists? It doesn't stop there...political campaigns are also run, in many ways, similar to how a lab is run. Think of the principal investigator as the political candidate – they get all the glitz and fame and are lead

authors on papers. Below them are postdocs – they lead a lot of the work and get less credit for it, and work long shifts for low pay. Under postdocs are graduate students, who are paid but have smaller projects. Finally, in the science lab, we have people like interns, whose work is indispensable but much smaller in scope, and are often unpaid. Rejection is a common part of both types of work, whether it's getting a paper rejected (science) or a constituent slamming a door in your face (field organizing in politics).

One way science and political campaigns differ is the fast-paced, time-is-of-the-essence nature of political campaigns. Campaigns operate alongside the 24-hour news cycle and it can be very fast-paced to keep up. Science is grueling in a different way, though the papers and research that are published are on a much longer time scale. Expect to have days full of highs and lows working in politics, just like one might have on a day in the lab.

Whether working in a political campaign or in a science lab, the team must be aligned and motivated to succeed, working with adequate resources. Sometimes, manpower can be the “sweat equity” for campaigns and labs to get more done on a budget, but sometimes, it can't. That's where being strategic comes in, and that often comes from the top.

The political campaign hierarchy has many advantages, as the money coming into the campaign can funnel into the different departments, and the different departments can also stay aligned with uniform direction and management from the top. However, this also has some disadvantages.

A main disadvantage is that the people at the top have a lot of say in how the campaign is run. Sometimes a “lower” person, such as an unpaid volunteer, has an idea to make the campaign better. In good campaigns, the opinions of all workers, paid and unpaid, go into the campaign to make it better. However, there is also an issue of toxic campaign culture in which higher-ups force staffers to work long hours and make choices that are either inconsequential or detrimental to a campaign. A good campaign has talented staff that take into account the needs of workers, so make sure to vet the political campaigns you are looking to work on to see how kind they are to their own staff.

Keep reading to learn about ways scientists can contribute their unique skills and knowledge in the many areas required in a political campaign.

A Primer on Political Campaign Roles

Political campaigns are [organized as a hierarchy](#), with one person overseeing the entire campaign: the campaign manager.

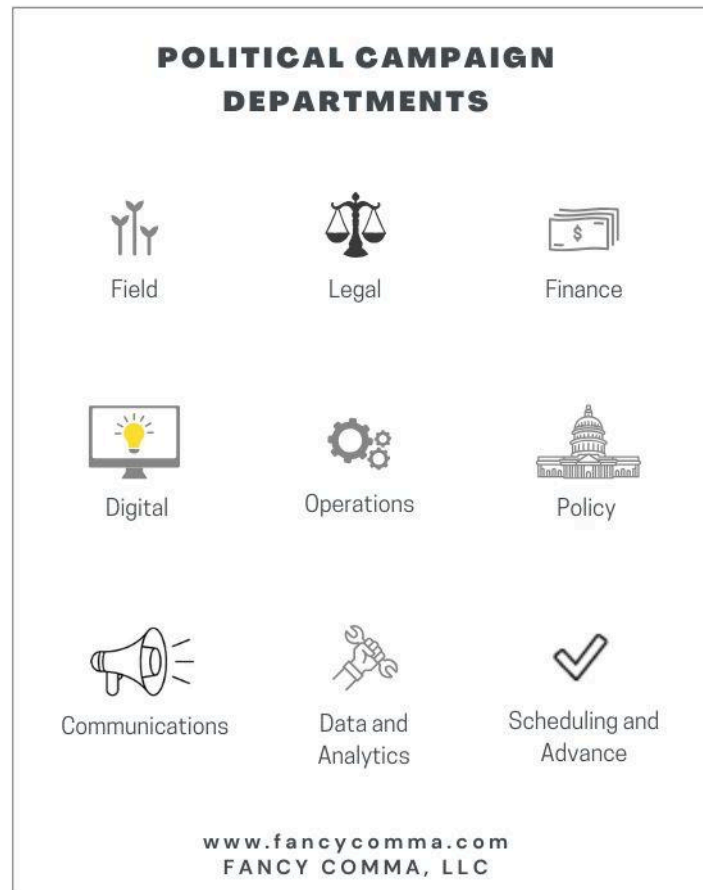
The campaign manager position is a paid position and one that typically comes from deep work in the political world. In smaller races, the campaign manager may be the only paid position in the campaign. People can get involved in the many other political campaign roles in two main ways: either as a paid staffer or an unpaid volunteer.

While the campaign manager is tasked with the entire campaign operations, they do not do it all themselves. They can be part of a “core leadership” team which may include a deputy campaign manager and an executive chairman.

The core leadership also has the help of several dedicated departments that deal with the different parts of a campaign, including: **communications, operations, finance, field, digital, policy, data and analytics, legal, and scheduling and advance**. Each department typically has a director, deputy directors, coordinators to perform specific functions, support staff, and volunteers. This explainer covers only the departments above, but campaigns may have additional staff and different structure depending on individual needs.

Scientists are not typically involved in political organizing in a structured way, but their involvement not only brings fresh quantitative and critical thinking expertise that can help drive the campaign and may help elevate the status of science in political campaigns. Scientist political involvement can also be helpful for scientists interested in getting into policy as many politicians hire staff directly from their campaigns when they win (though generally, this route to working in politics is rare and often more common with paid staff).

Let's next talk about the different departments and where scientists can use their unique skills.



Communications Department

The communications department (often shortened as “comms”) is responsible for crafting the campaign message and interfacing with both the media and the public.

Key responsibilities include:

- Press relations
- Advertising
- Message development
- Campaign image management – making sure images are in line with branding guidelines for the campaign and political party
- Media relations – talking to journalists and media outlets
- Keeping tabs on what other candidates may be saying about the candidate and developing responses and strategies
- Communicating via traditional means – for example, via TV, newspaper, and radio – and digital means – via email, social media, and so on.

Scientists can play a crucial role in the communications department by:

- Providing expert knowledge on scientific issues relevant to the campaign
- Fact-checking and ensuring accuracy of scientific claims in campaign materials
- Translating complex scientific concepts into accessible language for the public
- Communicating in a nuanced way that deals with uncertainty in an evidence-based fashion regarding issues in science and technology, such as health, agriculture, defense, energy, and environment, to name a few
- Preparing the candidate or advising the campaign for debates or interviews on science-related topics

With their analytical skills and commitment to evidence-based reasoning, scientists and science communicators can help campaigns communicate more effectively and accurately on scientific issues.

Operations Department

The operations department handles the internal functions that keep a campaign running smoothly. This includes:

- Human Resources
- IT & Cybersecurity
- Financial Operations
- Logistics of Field Operations (see more about the Field Department elsewhere in this document)

Scientists can contribute to the operations department by:

- Applying data analysis skills to optimize campaign processes
- Implementing robust cybersecurity measures to protect sensitive campaign data
- Developing algorithms for efficient resource allocation
- Creating models to forecast staffing needs and budget requirements
- Build organizational capacity by implementing data infrastructure
- Create analytical frameworks to assess organizational capacity and leadership development
- Developing systems to track and measure whether the programs are achieving desired campaign goals

The systematic thinking and problem-solving abilities of scientists can greatly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of campaign operations.

Finance Department

The finance department is responsible for fundraising, managing campaign funds, and ensuring compliance with campaign finance laws. Here in the US, the Federal Election Commission is an independent government regulatory agency that oversees the financial activities of political campaigns. Therefore, all activities must adhere to the legal standards set by the FEC.

Key responsibilities of the Finance Department include:

- Fundraising
- Budget management
- Financial compliance
- Donor relations

Scientists' quantitative skills can be a huge asset for the finance department, adding value in the following ways:

- Analyzing donor data to identify trends and optimize fundraising strategies
- Developing predictive models for fundraising projections
- Ensuring accurate and transparent financial reporting
- Applying statistical methods to evaluate the effectiveness of different fundraising approaches

The quantitative skills and attention to detail that scientists possess can be invaluable in managing campaign finances and maximizing fundraising efforts.

Field Department

The field department is what one typically thinks of when they think of political campaigns. It focuses on grassroots organizing, voter outreach, and get-out-the-vote efforts. Field is the ground operations of the campaign and therefore must be closely linked to other areas such as Communications and Digital.

Key responsibilities of the Field Department include direct voter contact via:

- Canvassing
- Phone and text banking
- Digital field organizing teams on social media
- Local event organization
- Managing campaign offices
- Voter records management

Field is one area where scientists can volunteer without any specialized campaign expertise. There is no barrier to entry for volunteering – all it takes is time and the energy to get out and talk to voters. If you do not want to go door-to-door, there are also many virtual phone and text canvassing opportunities available.

Scientists can contribute to the field department by:

- Organizing in their local communities and answering constituent questions about science issues relating to areas such as health, environment, energy, agriculture, and more.
- Applying data analysis to target voter outreach efforts more effectively
- Developing algorithms to optimize canvassing routes and volunteer assignments
- Applying their research, hypothesis-testing, and statistical skills to conduct surveys and analyzing results to gauge voter sentiment and key issues for which to develop messaging
- Creating models to predict voter turnout and identify key demographics

The data-driven approach of scientists can significantly enhance the efficiency and impact of field operations. It can also be a way for scientists to have one-on-one conversations with everyday people about science and its role in society. How cool would it be for an environmental scientist to be able to answer a voter's questions about a candidate's climate policies, for example?

Scientist involvement in field operations is not rare, especially for young college-age students. In college, I knew a physics student who took time off to go on the campaign trail for Barack Obama for several months.

Field is my favorite area, since I have been field organizing since approximately 1998. There's more to it than simply talking to voters.

Here are even more roles scientists can have in field operations:

Data-Driven Field Operations

Scientists can enhance field operations through sophisticated data analysis and experimental approaches:

- Design and analyze [field experiments](#) to test the effectiveness of voter outreachDevelop models to predict voter behavior and optimize targeting strategies
- Create algorithms to improve the efficiency of canvassing routes and volunteer assignments

Voter Contact Optimization

Scientists can help improve the effectiveness of voter contact programs by:

- Analyzing demographic and other campaign data to enhance the relevance of voter contact messaging
- Evaluating the impact of local versus non-local volunteers on voter persuasion, as many campaigns now have both “virtual” and local field teams
- Developing metrics to measure the success of different outreach strategies
- Creating systems to measure and evaluate campaign effectiveness

Get Out The Vote (GOTV) Strategy

Scientists can strengthen GOTV efforts through:

- Analyzing timing and impact of voter contacts near Election Day
- Calculating win numbers based on turnout projections
- Creating predictive models for voter turnout
- Going door-to-door themselves

Research and Analysis

Scientists can provide valuable insights through:

- Conducting opposition research and background analysis grounded in data
- Crafting evidence-based narratives based on deep research into opposition communications, the media landscape, and more
- Analyzing the effectiveness of different persuasion techniques
- Evaluating the impact of various campaign interventions through experiments (this type of hypothesis testing can take the form of what is called “[A/B testing](#)” in the marketing world)

Tech-minded organizers also have an outsized role to play in modernization of field operations. Novel systems can be used to design and maintain voter file databases, create apps for field staff to track and report data, and to measure and evaluate campaign effectiveness.

The systematic thinking, analytical skills, and data-driven approach that scientists bring can significantly enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of campaign field operations.

One last note about Field before we move on: If you're a scientist and you are interested in the science of scaling field organizing campaigns for political candidates to

help elect a pro-science politician, [you might be interested in this white paper](#) written as a collaboration between people from Harvard University and the Democratic National Committee. A lot of the above insights are summarized from that white paper!

Digital Department

The digital department manages the campaign's online presence, including social media, email marketing, and digital advertising.

Scientists can play a crucial role in the digital department by:

- Applying their attention to detail and ability to critically evaluate the data on trends regarding voter trends to craft key messages, graphics, and other digital assets
- Analyzing social media and polling data to identify trends and optimize content strategy
- Developing algorithms for targeted digital advertising
- Conducting hypothesis-driven A/B testing to improve digital marketing effectiveness (for example, in email and/or social media marketing campaigns)
- Applying machine learning techniques to personalize digital outreach

With their technical expertise and analytical skills, scientists can help campaigns leverage digital tools more effectively to reach and engage voters. They can also communicate scientific issues with greater clarity and detail than nonscientist political staffers. Increasingly, Digital, like Field, is becoming an area in which volunteers can work, crafting messages to gain voter buy-in, so this could potentially be another area where scientists could donate their time.

Policy Department

While not always a separate department, policy development is a crucial aspect of any campaign. This involves researching issues, developing policy proposals, and preparing the candidate for debates and interviews.

Scientists are particularly well-suited for policy-related work, including:

- Conducting in-depth research on scientific and technical issues
- Developing evidence-based policy proposals
- Providing expert advice on complex scientific topics
- Analyzing the potential impacts of proposed policies

The rigorous research skills and subject matter expertise of scientists can significantly enhance a campaign's policy development process.

Data and Analytics Department

Many modern campaigns have a dedicated data and analytics department that uses data-driven approaches to inform campaign strategy across all other departments.

This is a natural fit for scientists, who can contribute by:

- Developing predictive models for voter behavior and election outcomes
- Analyzing polling data and conducting statistical analyses
- Creating data visualization tools to communicate insights effectively
- Implementing machine learning algorithms for various campaign applications

Scientists' expertise in data analysis, statistical methods, and machine learning can provide campaigns with valuable insights and competitive advantages.

Scheduling and Advance Department

As its name implies, the Scheduling and Advance Department manages the candidate's schedule and prepares for campaign events. Key responsibilities include:

- Candidate scheduling
- Event planning
- Travel coordination
- Managing incoming scheduling requests

Scientists can contribute to this department by:

- Optimizing travel schedules using algorithmic approaches
- Analyzing data on event attendance and engagement to inform future planning
- Developing models to predict the impact of different event types and locations
- Using data analysis to identify the most strategic locations and times for campaign events

The systematic thinking and optimization skills of scientists can help campaigns make the most efficient use of the candidate's time and resources.

Legal Department

While not typically staffed by scientists, the legal department can benefit from scientific expertise in certain areas:

- Providing expert testimony on scientific issues in legal disputes
- Assisting with patent or intellectual property issues related to campaign technology
- Analyzing scientific evidence in cases related to environmental or health policies

Scientists with legal knowledge or those willing to work closely with lawyers can contribute significantly to a campaign's legal strategy on science-related issues.

Conclusion

Political campaigns offer a wide range of opportunities for scientists to apply their skills and knowledge beyond traditional research settings. From data analysis and policy development to communications and field operations, scientists can make valuable contributions across all campaign departments.

By getting involved in political campaigns, scientists can help ensure that scientific evidence and reasoning play a more prominent role in the political process. This not only benefits the campaigns but also promotes more informed decision-making in government and policy-making.

For scientists interested in pursuing these opportunities, it's important to network, volunteer for local campaigns to gain experience, and be prepared to translate your scientific skills into campaign-relevant competencies. Many campaigns are increasingly recognizing the value of scientific expertise, making this an exciting time for scientists to engage in the political process.

Good campaigns are meritocracies, and with dedication and competence, you can rise to positions of significant responsibility. Whether you're interested in a short-term local campaign or a long-term national effort, there's likely a role where your scientific skills can make a real difference.

The size and complexity of these departments vary significantly based on the campaign's scale. While large national campaigns might have hundreds of staff members across all departments, local campaigns may have just one paid staff member handling multiple functions.

About Fancy Comma, LLC

Fancy Comma, LLC is a science communications, marketing, and policy firm. Check out our other free, helpful resources at www.fancycomma.com/learn.