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Party-crashers or wallflowers? The lack of strategic voting in experimental primaries

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ABSTRACT

Open and semi-open primaries allow members of opposing political parties to participate in the selection of candidates for the general election. This feature has led to the claim that partisans will ‘cross-over’ and vote in the rival party’s primary, thereby sabotaging that party’s selection process. Using an experimental election, in which it is costly to vote, we find that most voters vote sincerely or not at all, and find little evidence of strategic voting.

KEYWORDS:

Voting experiment primary types

JEL CLASSIFICATION:

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Highlights

- We conduct an experiment of voting under different primary types.
 - We examine voter choices in primary and general elections when costs increase.
 - Voters are largely unwilling to engage in strategic voting.
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

¹ For the role of primaries in European countries and Latin America see Pennings and Hazan ([2001](#)) and Carey and Polga-Hecimovich ([2006](#)).

² As in the real world, the proportion of strategic votes was calculated using the number of voters as the denominator.

³ Strategic voting has ramification not just for participation, but for electoral outcomes. Issues like these are discussed in more detail in Blackwell and Calcagno ([2014](#)).

Additional information

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