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Crossover Among Republican Voters
In
A Dominant Democratic Setting

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Proponents of strong political parties have frequently singled out the
direct primary—and particularly the open primary—as a deterrent to the
realization of a responsible party system. Critics argue that by not requiring
voters to register with a party in order to vote in its primary, adherents of
the smaller of two parties are invited to crossover and "raid" the majority
party by seeking to force the nomination of its least attractive candidate.
Alternately, critics contend that those who would normally be most at­
tracted to the smaller party, seeking to have a voice in the election outcome,
will participate in the larger party's primary thus causing the smaller party
to atrophy.¹ These arguments have often been advanced to help explain the
weakness of the Republican Party in one party areas of the South. Though
speculation about the nature and size of the crossover is rampant among
political observers,² political scientists have not gathered any accurate
evidence concerning "how much crossover actually occurs, and whether a
significant proportion of voters in open primary states frequently shift from
one primary to the other on candidates or issues that attract their
interests."³ This note reports an investigation of the extent and nature of
Republican crossover voting in a dominantly Democratic county where
there is an open primary.

Setting

Putman County, Tennessee is located in the middle "Grand Division"
of Tennessee; and, like most other counties in this area, is overwhelmingly
Democratic. This can be seen by the fact that the mean GOP proportion of
the vote in state-wide elections since 1972 is 43.52 percent for Putnam
County and 40.42 percent for all other middle Tennessee counties.
Although Putnam has experienced more population growth in recent years
than many middle Tennessee counties, this has not led to any dramatic
change in partisan composition. County elections are partisan, but
Republicans who seek office do so as independents. No Republican has
recently sought a seat in the State Assembly or the U.S. House from this
area. The county has been carried by a Republican gubernatorial nominee
only once in the last sixty-odd years. Putnam, like most other middle
Tennessee counties, has had a Republican primary for Governor and U.S.
Senator only since 1966. The dominance of the Democratic primary is
revealed by the low rate of participation in the Republican primary; since 1972, mean turnout of eligible voters in the Republican primary is 5.4 percent for Middle Tennessee and only 3.4 percent for Putnam County. The corresponding figures for the Democratic primary are 35.48 and 24.55. Reflecting state politics, the political composition of Putnam County has been influenced by partisan inheritance formed during the Civil War.

Data

To investigate the degree of crossover by Republican primary voters, lists of voters who voted in the 1972 and 1978 GOP primaries were obtained from the local party. Although the lists were not completely accurate, the names on them were matched to produce three groups: (1) those who voted in both primaries, (2) those who voted only in 1972, (3) those who voted only in 1978. This procedure allowed us to judge the number of likely crossover voters. A simple random sample was taken of these two lists and resulted in 148 completed interviews with a .95 level of confidence with 7 percent tolerated error. Since neither list of voters was entirely correct and many of the voters listed for the 1972 primary could no longer be located, it is impossible precisely to estimate the representativeness of this sample. Moreover, because we surveyed these voters by telephone, we did not include both spouses of the same family in the sample. This decision reduced the size of our sample, but it also eliminated concern about any tendency for respondents to attempt to offer responses consistent with those of their spouses. The interview schedule, which was a compromise between the open-ended and forced choice formats, attempted to nudge the memory of those called by listing the major candidates who ran in primary elections for Governor and/or U.S. Senator since 1972 and then asking the respondents whether or not they recalled voting in that primary. Also included were standard questions concerning age, occupation, previous residency, political involvement and party identification.

Results

Employing the standard measure of party identification, we find that among Republicans approximately 16 percent had crossed over into the Democratic primary and nearly 9 percent of the Republican primary participants were Democratic identifiers (see Table I). These figures do not differ dramatically from a previous survey conducted in another Democratically dominant open primary state. However, it is a bit surprising that any Democratic identifiers chose the Republican primary and consequently had to forego voting for State Assembly or for other offices.

Those studies which have compared primary voters to general election voters have consistently found the former to be better educated, older, and more interested and active in politics than the non-primary voter. Our data
indicate that the same variables also separate the primary switcher from the loyal partisan. Although not statistically significant, persons between 45 and 60 years of age, and those who had completed a high school degree were more likely to crossover. As a surrogate measure of political involvement, we used two questions which asked if the respondent had ever talked to people to try and influence their vote and whether they had ever done any work to help a candidate. While our switchers were no more likely to do volunteer campaign work, they were significantly more involved in attempting to influence other peoples’ votes by discussing politics with them.

Perhaps the most striking difference between switchers and non-switchers in these data is between the patterns of previous residency (Table II). Among Putman County Republicans who were originally from the strong GOP heartland of East Tennessee, there were no crossover voters. Among those who moved to Putnam County from a non-southern state there was only one switcher. Practically all crossover voters were native middle Tennesseans or those who had moved from another southern or border state. These data, then, support Jewell’s intimation that switching primaries will most likely occur when the voter is accustomed to one-party politics. 

### TABLE I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Participation</th>
<th>Independence</th>
<th>Independence</th>
<th>Strong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dem. (n) (%)</td>
<td>Dem. (n) (%)</td>
<td>Rep. (n) (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Switchers</td>
<td>3 (27)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>15 (65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switchers</td>
<td>8 (73)</td>
<td>1 (100)</td>
<td>8 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11 (100)</td>
<td>1 (100)</td>
<td>23 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ x^2 = 43.6380 \]

While a great deal of attention has been paid to the effect the migration of Northern Republicans has had on the development of GOP competitiveness in the South, the consequences of this movement on primary participation has been largely overlooked. Although our data are limited, they do indicate that this migration will provide a new group of partisans who are very unlikely to crossover. There is no evidence in the data that this pattern of behavior is influenced by the length of residency in a southern political setting.
### TABLE II
Primary Switching by Area of Previous Residency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Previous Residency</th>
<th>Primary Participation</th>
<th>Middle Tennessee or Another Southern Border State*</th>
<th>Outside the South</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>East Tennessee</td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(n)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Switchers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>(71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switchers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>(29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Southern states are classified as the eleven states of the Confederacy. Border states included Kentucky, Oklahoma, Maryland, and Missouri.

\[ X^2 = 8.3292 \]

\[ x = 0.0155 \]

### TABLE III
Rationales for Switching Primaries by Party Identification Combined for All Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationales</th>
<th>Republicans (n) (%)</th>
<th>Democrats (n) (%)</th>
<th>Total (n) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Orientation*</td>
<td>11 (39)</td>
<td>14 (100)</td>
<td>25 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To participate in State</td>
<td>9 (32)</td>
<td>9 (21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly Race</td>
<td>3 (11)</td>
<td>3 (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raid Opposition</td>
<td>5 (18)</td>
<td>5 (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28 (100)</td>
<td>14 (100)</td>
<td>42 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes positive and negative responses toward various candidates.  
**Includes issue responses, such as Watergate, Panama Canal, etc.

One of the criticisms of the open primary has been that it will encourage strategic voting or raiding. While the question of the extent and nature of raiding has raised considerable controversy among politicians and political scientists, it has produced little systematic evidence. Our data indicate that few Republicans—in fact only two individuals—voted in Democratic primaries to nominate a less attractive candidate. One person recalled voting in two Democratic primaries for this reason; the other only recalled raiding as a reason for voting in one Democratic primary. The most prevalent reasons given for switching primaries were the attractiveness of a
TABLE IV

Responses to the Question, "What Would You Do If a Party Registration Law Were Passed?"

By Switchers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Switchers (n)</th>
<th>Non Switchers (n)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/other</td>
<td>10 (29)</td>
<td>17 (15)</td>
<td>27 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register as a Republican</td>
<td>12 (34)</td>
<td>83 (73)</td>
<td>95 (64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register as a Democrat</td>
<td>5 (14)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Register</td>
<td>8 (23)</td>
<td>13 (12)</td>
<td>21 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35 (100)</td>
<td>113 (100)</td>
<td>148 (99)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ x^2 = 27.63662 \]

\[ s = .001 \]

candidate or interest in the contested Democratic State Assembly primary races (Table III).\textsuperscript{12} Yet, the fact that two people did volunteer raiding as their reason for switching does discredit the notion that raiding is a figment of the imagination.\textsuperscript{13}

One of the periodic controversies in Tennessee politics is over the open primary system. The most recent Democratic governor, for example, argued that Republicans often raided Democratic primaries, and he proposed to the General Assembly that the state adopt a closed primary system.\textsuperscript{14} When we asked about the proposal to institute a closed primary system in Tennessee, 70 percent of our respondents were opposed. Primary crossover voters were opposed significantly more often than others. They were also significantly more likely to justify their opposition by their desire to vote for the best man.

Finally, this survey does suggest that the introduction of a closed primary—that could be enforced—might reduce crossover voting.\textsuperscript{15} When asked what they would do if a closed primary was adopted, most switchers would register as Republican but they were more likely than non-switchers to state they would not register with either party (Table IV).

CONCLUSION

These data indicate that approximately one-quarter of those persons who voted in a Republican primary recall voting in a Democratic primary principally because of the attractiveness of a candidate or interest in a contest the outcome of which they would otherwise have been unable to affect. Though these data are limited, they do suggest that the typical crossover voter is older, has been raised in a one-party area, and is not strongly identified with his party. He does, however, exhibit at least as much political involvement as other primary voters. To a large extent crossing-over in Putnam
County and most of the South is probably due to the fact that Republican primaries have been a recent phenomenon. Obviously, the crossover vote needs more academic attention in both one-party and competitive party situations.

NOTES


2See, for example The Tennessee Journal 2 (June 21, 1976), 1-3.


4Voting turnout is calculated by the standard formula: voting turnout = number of votes cast divided by the number of persons of voting age.

5These figures roughly compare with the mean percent voter turnout in primary elections for one-party Democratic states. See Austin Ranney, "Parties in State Politics" in Herbert Jacob and Kenneth M. Vines, Eds., Politics in the American States (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), 71.

6For an analysis of the impact of the Civil War on Tennessee politics, see V. O. Key, Jr., Southern Politics (New York: Knopf, 1949), 75–81.

7The party list of 1972 Republican primary voters contains 998 names, but the state returns show 1,308 voters. The 1978 party list contains 996 names, but only 885 persons voted in the Republican primary.


10Jewell and Olson, ibid.


12County primaries are not held on the same day as primaries for statewide office in Tennessee. Thus local elections are not a factor in the crossover vote.

13Hugh L. LeBlance and D. Trudeau Allensworth, The Politics of State and Urban Communities (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 90, state that "No empirical evidence points to a 'raid' of a party's primary by members of the opposition party who consciously seek to nominate the weakest candidate of their opponents in order to enhance their own chance for victory in the general election."

14Party registration has been thwarted in the Tennessee General Assembly by a coalition of conservative Democrats who fear it would lead to domination of the party by liberals, and virtually all Republicans who, ironically, seem to feel it would allow Democrats to nominate more conservative candidates. Tennessee Journal, op. cit., 13.

15To prevent raiding, closed primary laws must, of course, be enforced. See Hugh A. Bone, American Politics and the Party System, op. cit., 270-271.