

# Assessing strategic voting in the 2008 US presidential primaries: the role of electoral context, institutional rules, and negative votes

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**Abstract** We examine the nature and extent of strategic voting in the 2008 US presidential primary. In doing so, we distinguish positive strategic voters—those casting ballots for their second choice in the primary and general election—from negative strategic voters—those casting ballots for a candidate they want to lose in the general election. We find evidence of both types in 2008. Moreover, we show that the likelihood of voting strategically is related to the electoral and institutional context. Specifically, those who prefer trailing candidates and who live in states with open primaries or with elections after John McCain became the presumed nominee were more likely to vote strategically.

**Keywords** Negative strategic voting · Open primaries · Electoral institutions

## 1 Introduction

Scholars know considerably less about voter decision making in the nomination stage of US presidential elections compared to the general election stage. Party identification, the single best predictor of vote choice in the general election, is of little use for understanding voting behavior in the within-party contests. Perhaps more importantly, voters are more likely to weigh factors such as electability and viability in their vote decision as they look ahead to the general election contest (Bartels 1988). In other words, voters may behave strategically, casting a ballot for someone other than their most preferred candidate. Although strategic behavior is well documented (Alvarez and Nagler 2000), we know

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much less about the conditions under which an individual will vote for a less preferred candidate.

In this article, we examine variation in strategic behavior in the 2008 US presidential primary using the 2007–2008 AP/Yahoo Election panel study. This unique panel included multiple waves of data collection during the primary season, providing a rare opportunity to examine decision making in a two-stage election (Cassette et al. 2013). First, we evaluate the extent and nature of strategic behavior in a way that bridges disparate literatures and builds a more comprehensive view of decision making in the primary. Our analysis distinguishes strategic voters who cast a ballot for their second choice candidate (we call this a *positive strategic vote*) from those who cast a strategic ballot for a candidate they want to lose in the general election (we call this a *negative strategic vote*). Second, we examine the extent to which strategic behavior is a function not just of individual preferences and characteristics, but also the electoral and institutional context.

We find evidence of both positive and negative strategic voters in the 2008 US presidential election primary, with most of the negative strategic voting directed at Hillary Clinton. Indeed, those who voted *strategically* for Hillary Clinton were just as likely to vote Republican in the general election as those who voted *sincerely* for John McCain. Finally, we show that voters living in states with open primary rules and with elections held after McCain became the presumed nominee were more likely to vote strategically. Although data constraints limit our analysis to a single election—and an exceptional one at that—results highlight both the complexity of decision making in presidential primaries and the predictable patterns of strategic behavior created by electoral rules and context.

## 2 Background and expectations

Strategic voting is typically defined as voting for a candidate who is “not the preferred one, motivated by the intention to affect the outcome of the election” (Blais et al. 2001, p. 344). That is, voters will cast their ballots strategically based on a combination of preferences and expectations about each candidate’s chance of winning. Although there is no incentive to behave strategically in two-candidate elections, a long line of theoretical and empirical research has shown that voters will cast their ballot strategically to avoid “wasting” their vote in multicandidate contests (McKelvey and Ordeshook 1972; Cox 1997; Niemi et al. 1993). While much of the research has focused on plurality elections in multiparty political systems (Johnston and Pattie 1991; Alvarez and Nagler 2000) or elections with a popular minor candidate in the USA (Burden 2005; Hillygus 2007), two-stage contests, such as US presidential primary elections, can also create the incentives for strategic voting (Abramson et al. 1992; Bartels 1985).

Somewhat surprisingly, two distinct literatures reach different conclusions about the prevalence of strategic behavior in US presidential primaries. The first body of literature specifically examines the extent to which individuals might vote for a second choice candidate if their most preferred one has no chance of winning. Abramson et al. (1992) call such strategic voting *sophisticated* strategic voting and conclude that this type of behavior is quite commonplace. Using the 1988 NES Super Tuesday survey, they estimate that at least 13 % of respondents in each party were “apparently sophisticated” (Abramson et al. 1992). This definition of strategic behavior mirrors that used in the broader literature on strategic voting in multiparty contests. We label this positive strategic voting to distinguish it from a second type of strategic behavior in primaries.

That is, some voters might vote strategically when their most preferred candidate has no chance of *losing* the first-stage election. Such strategic voting is specific to primary contests, and in the case of the US nomination process, stems from an asymmetry in the competitive environment across political parties. If you know that your preferred candidate is guaranteed a spot in the second stage, you might cast your ballot for another candidate to try to influence who your preferred candidate will face, either as a hedge in case your most preferred candidate loses the general election or as a mischievous vote for the candidate viewed as the weakest competition. We label this negative strategic voting.<sup>1</sup> Both negative and positive strategic behaviors involve voting for someone other than a most preferred candidate, but negative strategic voters are casting a ballot for someone they do not want to win in the general election, while positive strategic voters are casting a ballot for the candidate they want to win the general election provided that their first choice is not competing. To be clear, a negative voter does not necessarily dislike the candidate they vote for, but they do prefer that candidate less than other candidates in both the primary *and* general election.

Although conceptually distinctive in important ways, crossover voting—whereby partisans vote in the other party’s primary when their own is not competitive—has been well studied in US presidential primaries. Scholars have found crossover voting to be quite common in some contests—ranging from just a handful of voters to as many as 49 % of the electorate (Southwell 1989; Hedlund and Watts 1986; Abramowitz et al. 1981; Hedlund 1977; Ranney 1972; Burden and Jones 2009), but most of the literature concludes that it is rarely strategic (Ranney 1972; Abramowitz et al. 1981). In other words, most crossover voting is thought to be done by voters who sincerely prefer a candidate who does not share their party affiliation. In one of the earliest studies of primary behavior, for instance, Overacker (1926, p. 98) concludes that crossover voters are “motivated by a genuine interest in, and support of, the candidate for whom they voted.” More recent empirical work reaches similar conclusions (Ranney 1972; Abramowitz et al. 1981; Sides et al. 2002; Alvarez and Nagler 2002; Burden and Jones 2009).

To the extent scholars conclude that there is strategic behavior among crossover voters, they attribute it to hedging, whereby crossover voters cast a strategic ballot for their most preferred candidate in another party who is not their highest ranked overall.<sup>2</sup> That way, if their most preferred candidate loses in the general election, it is more likely that their most preferred candidate of the other party will win. Some observers consider hedging to be less normatively troubling than mischievous voting, but in either case, voters are casting a ballot for a candidate they would *vote against* in the general election (Kousser 2002). Although our descriptive analysis attempts to identify mischievous voters explicitly, both hedging and mischievous voting would be considered negative strategic voting by our definition.

Moreover, we argue that such votes can be cast not only by out-partisans crossing over, but also by independents and in-partisans who cast an insincere ballot for a candidate in the first stage election that they have no intention of supporting in the second stage.<sup>3</sup> If it is

<sup>1</sup> Others have used the term negative strategic voting to refer strictly to partisans who cast a ballot for an opposing party candidate they do not sincerely support (Southwell 1991). In contrast, our definition does not factor in the party affiliation (or registration) of the voter or candidate. As we show, there is a sizeable number of independents and in-partisans who vote for a candidate in the primary they intend to vote against in the general election.

<sup>2</sup> Cain and Gerber (2002) have a terrific edited volume that offers a comprehensive analysis of hedging versus mischievous voting in California.

<sup>3</sup> The operationalization of crossover voting actually varies widely in the literature. Some include Independents or unaffiliated voters as crossover voters, while others consider only partisans. Some use measures of party registration, while others use partisan self-identification. See Sides et al. (2002) for further discussion of this point.

plausible that self-identified Democrats and Independents sincerely supported John McCain in the primary, there is no reason to think they could not also have voted strategically for another candidate as a way to influence who he would face as an opponent in the general election. Indeed, we might expect that the unique dynamics of the 2008 Democratic contest in which a female candidate and black candidate were competing for the nomination could well have made in-party negative strategic voting more likely. In defining negative and positive strategic behavior without consideration of the party affiliation (or registration) of the voter and candidate, our analysis diverges from the previous literature.

Another way that our analysis expands on the previous literature is in examining strategic behavior at the individual level in a presidential race. Much of what we know about crossover voting comes from analyses of state-level races in a single state (Adamany 1976; Hedlund and Watts 1986; Hedlund 1977; Cain and Gerber 2002).<sup>4</sup> Yet, we might expect a high-profile presidential race to have different levels or correlates of strategic behavior. For example, Alvarez and Nagler (2002) find more crossover voting in California Assembly Races when there is an incumbent in the race, but we would expect incumbency effects to be less pronounced in a presidential race (and obviously not applicable to 2008). More importantly, voters should simply have more information about the candidates and their electoral prospects in presidential contests than in statewide races, which might increase the likelihood of behaving strategically (Merolla 2009). Given the proliferation of polling, there is no shortage of information about the competitive environment (and no shortage of “talking heads” analyzing the competitive environment) in recent US presidential primaries, and, in some cases, there have even been coordinated efforts to encourage strategic behavior on a large scale. Thus, the overall information levels and the possibility of coordination both distinguish the 2008 presidential primary from the lower level political contests considered in much of the previous research.

The data requirements to distinguish strategic from sincere behavior are formidable, however, requiring a comparison of an individual’s reported vote with his or her preference ranking of the candidates (Abramson et al. 1992). Because data on voter preference rankings are rare, much of our knowledge about strategic behavior in the US comes from aggregate vote returns (Jewell 1974), legislative roll calls (Gerber and Morton 1998), or exit poll results (Kaufmann et al. 2003; Geer 1986; Southwell 1989). Even the alternative individual-level data that do exist have not allowed such a comprehensive analysis of strategic behavior. For example, the 1988 American National Election Studies (ANES) Super Tuesday study includes the necessary measures to construct preference rankings to distinguish positive and negative strategic behavior, but the electoral context in which the data were collected provided little incentive for negative strategic voting.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, our analysis builds on both the literature on crossover voting and the literature on strategic voting in presidential primaries. To the broader literature on positive or “sophisticated” strategic voting in primaries, our key contribution is to consider the contextual correlates of strategic behavior. Whereas the research on crossover voting recognizes the importance of contextual factors, the research on positive strategic voting emphasizes individual-level correlates of such behavior; for example, strategic voters are

<sup>4</sup> There are a handful of notable exceptions (Geer 1986; Southwell 1989; Alvarez and Nagler 2000).

<sup>5</sup> The codebook notes that two thirds of respondents were interviewed in the week following Super Tuesday when both the Democratic and Republican contests were competitive. And in the classic work on the topic, Abramson et al. (1992) construct within party rankings so there is no consideration of preferences that might cross party lines.

thought to be more informed about the campaign and more interested in politics (Burden and Jones 2009). In contrast, we expect that an individual's propensity to vote strategically also depends on motivation and opportunity, structured by the electoral and institutional context. Motivation depends on the level of competition within and across parties. Opportunity depends on the institutional rules that make it easier or harder to cast a strategic ballot. Thus, we expect that individuals in open primary states will be more likely to vote strategically. The previous research on the effects of open primary rules on voting behavior is mixed, however; some find higher levels of crossover voting in open primaries (Southwell 1989), while others do not (Donovan 2008; Alvarez and Nagler 2000).<sup>6</sup>

We also expect that the level of competition across parties will be related to strategic voting (Sides et al. 2002). While the rules help to constrain the ability of voters to behave strategically, they must have reason to do so. They should be more likely to behave strategically if their preferred candidate has no chance of winning or no chance of losing. Given the changing nature of competition in a presidential primary, we thus expect variation across time in an individual's propensity to behave strategically. Supporters of trailing candidates should be more likely to vote for their second choice candidates. And once McCain became the presumed nominee, his supporters had an incentive to vote in the Democratic primary even if they had no intention of supporting the Democratic candidate in the general election.

The 2008 presidential election provides the electoral context and the data necessary to test these expectations. First, without an incumbent president or sitting vice president running, we saw crowded primaries on both sides of the aisle without a clear frontrunner in the invisible primary. For example, Rudolph Giuliani often led the national polls in the months before being trounced in the New Hampshire primary. As such, there were a number of supporters of trailing candidates who found their candidate uncompetitive by the time their state's primary was held—increasing the chance they would cast a ballot for their second choice (a positive strategic vote). On the Democratic side, the contest between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton lasted until the very final state, creating the competitive asymmetry that would create incentives for McCain supporters to cast a negative strategic vote. And the unique racial and gender dynamics of that race highlight the potential for in-party negative strategic voting. There was considerable speculation about the role of negative racial attitudes in primary voting (Safire 2008), so it is not implausible to imagine that some long-time Democratic voters might have preferred McCain to win the general election, but cast a ballot for Clinton in the primary as a hedge or mischievous vote.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, there were overt calls for negative strategic voting once the competitive environment created incentives for it. McCain officially secured enough delegates to win the Republican nomination on March 4, but many called him the presumptive nominee once Mitt Romney dropped out of the race on February 7. Once it became clear McCain would win, conservative bloggers and pundits started urging McCain supporters to vote mischievously. Most prominently, Rush Limbaugh launched "Operation Chaos" in late

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<sup>6</sup> Geer (1986) argues that if someone really wants to vote in a primary, she just has to figure out what is necessary to participate. While this is surely true, it also is the case that the competitive context that motivates strategic voting might not emerge until after party registration deadlines have passed. Using voting experiments, Cherry and Kroll (2003) find that negative strategic voting is more likely in open than closed rule conditions.

<sup>7</sup> Although these data limit our ability to explicitly test for the role of gender and racial attitudes, a cursory analysis suggests that among the Democrats who cast negative strategic votes for Clinton (i.e., they preferred McCain to either Clinton or Obama), only 36 % said they had a favorable view of blacks, compared to 56 % of those who cast a sincere vote for Clinton, 53 % of Democrats generally, and even 43 % of sincere McCain voters.

February to urge McCain supporters to vote for Hillary Clinton in order to prolong the divisive Democratic contest: “I want Hillary to stay in this. We need Barack Obama bloodied up politically, they are in the midst of tearing themselves apart. I’m asking people to cross over, and if they can stomach it and I know it’s a difficult thing to do, vote for Clinton...But it will sustain this soap opera, and it’s something I think we need and it’ll be fun, too” (Mooney 2008). To be sure, negative strategic voting does not require elite coordination—for example, Mitt Romney has admitted to casting the occasional negative strategic vote while living in Massachusetts—but the extent of media coverage simply highlights the fact that the motivation existed to cast such ballots.<sup>8</sup>

On the face of it, aggregate voting patterns suggest that some negative strategic voting may have occurred. In an analysis of 38 primary exit polls, Donovan (2008) finds higher levels of Republican crossover voters later in the campaign season. Again, though, exit poll numbers cannot distinguish the full extent of negative strategic behavior because some crossover voters might have been sincere and the numbers overlook in-partisans and Independents who might have cast negative strategic votes. One contribution of our analysis is that we attempt to disentangle sincere out-party voters and strategic in-party voters. More generally, we use a unique data set to examine variation in the nature and extent of strategic voting in the 2008 US presidential primaries.

### 3 Measuring strategic behavior

We examine individual-level voter decision making in the primaries using the 2007–2008 Associated Press Yahoo-News Election Panel, an 11-wave panel starting in November 2007 that included multiple waves of data collection before the fall general election campaign. The panel was sampled from the probability-based KnowledgePanel(R) Internet panel.<sup>9</sup> Our analysis primarily relies on data from waves 1–5 of the panel study to assess the dynamics in primary voting behavior.<sup>10</sup> Wave 1 was fielded November 2, wave 2 was

<sup>8</sup> Moreover, given the fragmented information environment, coordination might come from social networks, blogs, or message boards rather than political elites. Scholars have challenged the conclusion that Limbaugh was responsible for the increased rate of crossover voting because the trend started even before his announcement (Stephenson 2011; Donovan 2008). Although we are not able to explicitly test for elite/media effects in our data, we do find that negative strategic Clinton voters were more likely than sincere Clinton voters and even sincere McCain voters to say they often watched Fox News. See footnote 36 for more on this point.

<sup>9</sup> The study was a collaboration between the Associated Press and Yahoo Inc., with support from Knowledge Networks. The KnowledgePanel(R) panel members are chosen via a probability-based sampling method and using known published sampling frames that cover 96 % of the US population. Sampled non-Internet households are provided a laptop computer or MSN TV unit and free Internet service. The wave 1 survey (baseline) was fielded on November 2 2007 to a sample of 3,548 panel members of age 18 years or older who represented a general population sample. The total number of completed interviews at the baseline was 2,714, for a 76.5 % *cooperation rate*. Using the formula specified in Callegaro and Disogra (2008) to take into account initial recruitment into the KnowledgePanel, this represents a cumulative response rate (CUMRR1) of 11.2 %. This rate is a multiplicative combination of the panel recruitment response rate (AAPOR3), the household profile rate and the survey completion rate, but excludes the household retention rate. The study attempted to re-interview each of the baseline cases for a total of 11 waves. Kruse et al. (2009) and Deng et al. (2013) find little bias in these data from panel attrition and panel conditioning.

<sup>10</sup> Demographics are measured in a profile survey gathered separately from the panel study. Self-reported vote choice in the primary was asked in either wave 4 or 5 depending on the date of the election in the respondent’s state.

fielded December 15, wave 3 was fielded January 19, wave 4 was fielded April 3, and wave 5 wave fielded June 14 (post-primaries).<sup>11</sup>

The data in this study are admittedly quite complex and have their own set of limitations. Not only do we have multiple observations for each respondent, there is variation in the date respondents cast their primary ballot and thus variation in the candidate choice set available and the competitive environment. Despite these complexities, the data offer some unique advantages over existing data for examining strategic behavior. First, we are able to see how evaluations of the candidates change over time. Second, we are able to measure primary vote choice contemporaneously rather than using a recall measure from after the general election, which has been shown to overestimate support for the winning candidate (Atkeson 1999). Most importantly, we are able to calculate measures of preference directly at various stages in the nomination process, thereby allowing us to determine whether someone voted sincerely or strategically. In each wave, the respondents were asked to rate their favorability toward each candidate.<sup>12</sup> We took these measures of favorability and created a rank order of candidate preferences for each respondent, similar to the approach previously used with thermometer ratings (Bartels 1988). The respondent's most preferred candidate was assigned the ranking of 1, so a sample rank ordering from wave 2 might look like the following: Clinton 1, Obama 2, Giuliani 3, McCain 4, Edwards 5, Romney 6, Thompson 7, and Huckabee 8. There are a few things to note about these rankings. First, they were calculated without respect to party, as the example illustrates. Second, ties were allowed and assigned the smaller number (e.g., two candidates could receive a ranking of 1). This makes for a more conservative (and more accurate, we believe) classification of strategic behavior, but it means that the number assigned to the worst-ranked candidate depends on both the number of candidates evaluated in the wave and the number of ties given by the respondent.<sup>13</sup>

We illustrate these rankings with a simple comparison of rankings by self-reported party identification, shown in Fig. 1.<sup>14</sup> We see the general pattern that, as expected, Democratic identifiers ranked the Democratic candidates better on average than the Republican candidates, while the reverse is true for Republican identifiers.<sup>15</sup> Opinions of Clinton were especially polarized—out of seven candidates ranked in December 2007, Clinton is ranked the worst candidate among Republican identifiers (receiving an average ranking of 5.2 out of 7 candidates ranked) and is ranked just slightly better than the other candidates among Democratic identifiers (average ranking of 1.9). Among Republicans, Giuliani (1.9) slightly edges out McCain (2.2) as the most preferred candidate in the earliest wave, but

<sup>11</sup> In all waves, more than 75 % of the sample completed the survey within the first week of being fielded.

<sup>12</sup> The question was worded as follows: "For each of the following individuals, please select if you have a favorable or unfavorable impression of that person. If you don't know enough about the person to have an opinion, you can say that too" [very favorable; somewhat favorable; somewhat unfavorable; very unfavorable; don't know enough to say].

<sup>13</sup> Table 1 shows which candidates were ranked in each wave. Once a candidate dropped out of the race the candidate was not ranked in the subsequent wave. Additionally, Huckabee, who rose to prominence only just before the Iowa Caucus, was not included as a candidate in wave 1 (November 2007). A handful of respondents—less than 4 % in waves 1–3 and 5 % in wave 4—rank all candidates equally.

<sup>14</sup> We use the standard party identification question from wave 1 of the survey to help avoid conflation with primary voting. Independent leaners are included with partisans.

<sup>15</sup> We must be cautious in focusing on any particular trend across waves since the number of candidates ranked (and thus the worst ranking possible) varies across waves. We find similar patterns if we instead look at the percentage of voters who rank each candidate first by party—the measure used in subsequent analysis—but we present the full rankings here to clearly illustrate the structure of our key measure.

Independents ranked John McCain better than any other candidate in every wave. Even this basic comparison highlights the fact that primary contests in which Independents and out-partisans are able to participate could very well produce different election outcomes than those in which only in-partisans can participate (Gerber and Morton 1998).

While Democrats and Republicans rate candidates of their own party higher *on average*, there is considerable variation within party. For example, 14 % of Democrats ranked McCain first and 27 % of Republicans ranked Obama or Clinton first in April 2008.<sup>16</sup> Among Republican identifiers, Obama was often rated higher than some of the Republican contenders. Among Democrats, John McCain and Rudy Giuliani were often ranked higher than many of the Democratic candidates. This highlights the value of defining strategic voting without regard to partisanship.

Although these data offer a unique look at decision making in primaries, there are limitations. Our estimate of the absolute level of strategic behavior is surely subject to considerable measurement error. It is always a difficult and messy business to try to identify the preference orderings of voters—a direct measure of candidate rankings would be preferable (Alvarez and Nagler 2000). Somewhat reassuring, though, is that the relative rankings closely match alternative ranking measures we were able to construct from our study. For instance, preference rankings created from nine different trait measures found a similar proportion of partisans who preferred a candidate from the other party.<sup>17</sup> While the trait measures have the advantage of offering more individual items, thus reducing measurement error (Ansolabehere et al. 2008), the items were not asked in wave 2 of the survey. The findings are also consistent with Hagen and Johnston (2004), who find that Democratic identifiers ranked Republican John McCain, not Democrat Bill Bradley, as their second most preferred candidate behind Al Gore in the 2000 presidential contest.

We next look at the connection between actual reported votes in the primary and these candidate rankings. Table 1 shows the percentage of each candidate's voters who ranked that candidate as their most preferred candidate in each wave. For instance, 88 % of those who cast a ballot for Clinton ranked her as their preferred candidate in April 2008 (wave 4), but just 76 % of those who voted for her ranked her first in November 2007 (wave 1).

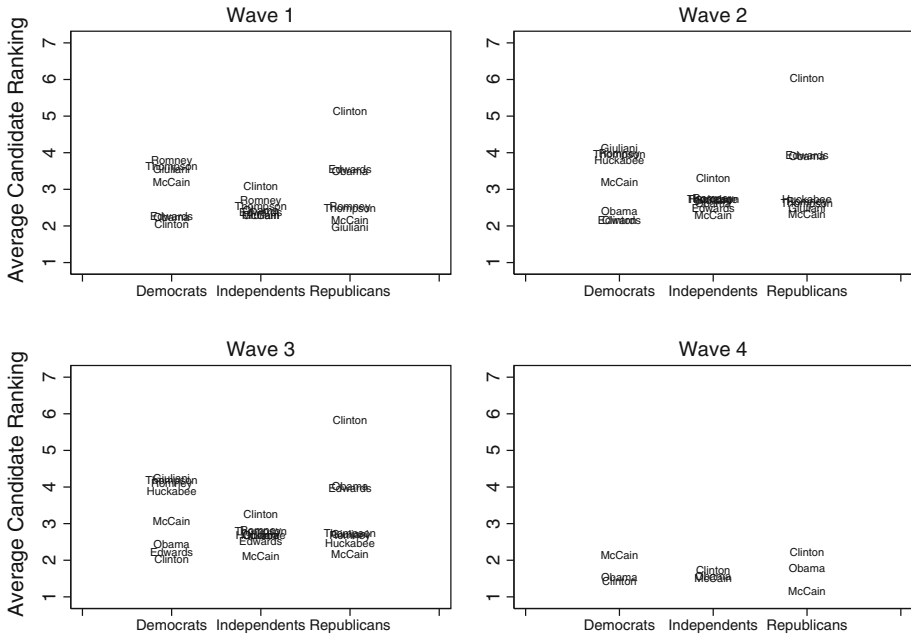
There are several notable patterns in the table. First, comparing the numbers across waves highlights the extent of variation across time. For instance, of those who eventually voted for McCain, only 57 % rated him first in November 2007 compared to 67 % in December, 74 % in January, and 95 % in April. Clearly, preferences are not fixed—voters appear to update their preference rankings to reflect the changing candidate field and campaign dynamics. In the aggregate, there is a stronger relationship between candidate preference rankings and eventual vote choice as the primary season unfolds.<sup>18</sup> Another interesting comparison is that Clinton received more strategic votes based on wave 4 preference measures, whereas McCain received more strategic votes based on wave 1

<sup>16</sup> Again, individuals could have more than one candidate ranked first.

<sup>17</sup> Each candidate was evaluated according to the following traits: likeable, decisive, strong, honest, experienced, compassionate, refreshing, ethical, and attractive. The exact question wording is as follows: "Please tell me how well each word describes [INSERT NAME OF CANDIDATE] (not at all well, slightly well, somewhat well, very well). Increasing the number of items used to measure candidate preference helps to reduce the measurement error (Ansolabehere et al. 2008). As an additional robustness check on the effects of measurement error, we reestimate our models, where possible, just for the subset of politically interested respondents (on the assumption that they should have less measurement error in their preference rankings) and find similar patterns in the data.

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that if we look into the general election, just 8.7 % of general election voters ultimately cast a ballot for the candidate (McCain or Obama) they ranked the highest in November 2007.





**Fig. 1** Average candidate rankings by party identification and survey wave. *Note* rankings can range from 1 to 8, with 1 representing a better ranking

preferences. This is at least an initial suggestion that there may be two distinct types of strategic behavior playing out in the election. It seems likely that different motivations underly the decision making of an individual who voted for Clinton, but did not rank her first in April, compared to the individual who voted for McCain even though they did not like him best in February. Finally, consistent with the findings of Abramson et al. (1992), we see that those voting for long-shot candidates Giuliani and Thompson were the most likely to rate them the best in early waves, suggesting that those candidates were not viewed as competitive by the time most voting was underway. That is, few voters were turning from their most preferred one to vote strategically for these two candidates, leaving only a pool of sincere supporters.<sup>19</sup>

Although the above analysis sheds light on some of the temporal changes in the campaign, it fails to take into account that individuals were voting at different times under different competitive contexts and with different candidate choice sets. Thus, to classify someone as a sincere or strategic voter, we use an individual’s preference rankings measured in the last survey wave before the primary date in his or her state.<sup>20</sup> This gives us a

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the same is not true for John Edwards voters. This may reflect the fact that those voting for Edwards actually preferred Obama or Clinton but feared a woman or African-American nominee might not be electable in the general election.

<sup>20</sup> For roughly two-thirds of respondents this was wave 3, thus typically capturing their vote preference before Super Tuesday, when Giuliani, Romney, Huckabee, and McCain were all running at double digits in the polls.

**Table 1** Primary vote and candidate preferences

	Percent ranking candidate most preferred			
	Wave 4	Wave 3	Wave 2	Wave 1
Clinton voters (346)	88	82	76	76
Obama voters (303)	93	81	83	75
McCain voters (196)	95	74	67	57
Edwards voters (25)	NA	70	71	58
Romney voters (100)	NA	78	63	65
Giuliani voters (14)	NA	82	100	100
Thompson voters (23)	NA	95	89	90
Huckabee voters (114)	NA	80	74	NA
All voters	87	78	75	75

Cell entries are percentage of respondents voting for a candidate who also ranked the candidate first on the favorability measures. Number of cases in parentheses

better measure of preference rankings than one that considers only if, for instance, someone rated McCain the best when he was the last Republican candidate standing (wave 4).

To distinguish positive and negative strategic behavior, we rely on the relative rankings of the candidates.<sup>21</sup> We classify as positive strategic voters those who voted for a candidate they did not rate the best, but for a candidate rated higher than any other of the competitive candidates. In other words, did the respondent vote for her second choice of the competitive candidates left in the election?<sup>22</sup> For example, an individual who ranked Romney best on the favorability measure but voted for McCain and ranked McCain higher than Obama or Clinton would be considered a positive strategic voter. In contrast, someone who ranked Romney best but voted for Clinton while ranking McCain or Obama higher than Clinton would be considered a negative strategic voter. Thus, we classified as a negative strategic voter someone who had the opportunity to vote for a competitive candidate she preferred more, but chose not to do so. Offering the clearest indication of mischievous strategic voting, we also report the subset of strategic voters who cast a ballot for the candidate they ranked the worst.<sup>23</sup> These are individuals who had the opportunity to vote for their *most* preferred but voted instead for their *least* preferred one. Just to reiterate, casting a negative vote for a candidate does not necessarily imply that the voter dislikes the candidate—only that they like that candidate less than the other competitive candidates in the primary and general election.

Table 2 reports the estimates of strategic voters for each candidate in the primaries. This measure finds that 21 % of primary voters cast a ballot for a candidate they did not rank as most

<sup>21</sup> Given the added complexity and limited payoff of coding all eight candidates (since there was no incentive to cast a negative strategic vote for any of them), we focus here only on the rankings of the three always competitive candidates—McCain, Obama, and Clinton—since these were the candidates who were competitive when all voters were casting ballots. Seventy-five percent of voters cast a ballot for one of these three candidates.

<sup>22</sup> Although some previous research strictly considers second choice preferences, this seemed too restrictive because so many respondents ranked uncompetitive candidates both first and second.

<sup>23</sup> To be clear, this is distinct from previous measures of mischievous voting that consider only crossover voters—we deliberately do not consider the party of the candidate or voter in determining if a voter cast a negative strategic or even a mischievous vote.

preferred. This includes 20 % of Clinton voters, 21 % of Obama voters, and 25 % of McCain voters. Clearly, this means that the majority of primary voters were behaving sincerely, but this is a number that is higher than found by previous research, likely because it captures both negative and positive strategic voting.<sup>24</sup> Among those voting for McCain, Clinton, or Obama, we estimate that roughly 10 % cast positive strategic votes, 7 % cast negative strategic votes, and 4 % could not be clearly classified as negative or positive because of ties.

More importantly, there is wide variation across candidates in the type of strategic votes received. Whereas 65 % of those casting a strategic vote for McCain were positive strategic voters—they ranked him highest among the competitive candidates—only 37 % of Clinton strategic voters could be classified as positive strategic votes. Likewise, just 11 % of those voting strategically for McCain could be classified as negative strategic votes, whereas 47 % of those voting strategically for Clinton were negative strategic votes, including 35 % who voted for Clinton even though they ranked her *last*. Of those who voted strategically for Obama, 48 % were positive strategic votes and 31 % were negative strategic voters, including just 14 % who ranked him last. Clearly, Clinton was the primary target of negative strategic voting. Although these negative strategic voters represented just 9 % of Clinton's pool of voters, this still means that there was a nontrivial number of individuals voting for her in the primary even though they apparently did not want her to become president.<sup>25</sup>

Given the overall small number of negative strategic voters, it is reasonable to question their potential impact on election outcomes. It is of course difficult to speak definitively about the impact of negative voting on the ultimate outcome given the complexity of the US nomination process, such as the varying delegate allocation rules across states and the temporal dependence of results. Nonetheless, we calculate a back-of-the-envelope estimate of the impact of negative strategic voting on the 2008 Democratic primary. In our first counterfactual estimate, we recalculate the Democratic primary election results removing the respective shares of estimated negative strategic votes from Clinton and Obama's vote totals (9.4 and 6.5 %, respectively)—thus assuming that these voters would have instead stayed home or voted in the Republican primary (since they preferred McCain to either Obama or Clinton).<sup>26</sup> In a second counterfactual estimate, to recognize the important role of the competitive context, we recalculate the election outcomes only for the subset of individuals living in states after McCain became the presumed nominee and using the estimate of Clinton and Obama's negative vote shares for that time period (14.4 and 5.5 %, respectively).

In both counterfactual exercises, we find that the overall popular vote winner of the 2008 Democratic primary switches from Clinton to Obama. To be sure, nominations are not decided by the popular vote, but it is nonetheless significant because so much was made of the popular vote in the 2008 contest. Clinton's decision to stay in the race was often defended based on her popular vote share.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the consequences on the

<sup>24</sup> For example, Abramson et al. (1992) found that 13 % of primary voters cast (positive) strategic ballots.

<sup>25</sup> For the sake of comparison with previous research, we looked at negative strategic voters by party identification. We find that 63 % of negative strategic voters were crossover voters, while 37 % were partisans (including leaners) who nonetheless cast a negative strategic ballot for a candidate of their same party. These were, for example, self-identified Democrats who voted for Clinton even though they ranked McCain higher. This suggests that previous research that focuses on crossover voters captures the majority of negative strategic voters, but—at least in 2008—this more restrictive definition would miss a notable subset of voters who cast a negative strategic ballot for a candidate of their own party.

<sup>26</sup> We relied on actual vote totals as reported by David Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections.

<sup>27</sup> For example, in her concession speech on 4 June 2008, Clinton remarked that “Nearly 18 million of you cast your votes for our campaign, carrying the popular vote with more votes than any primary candidate in history.”

**Table 2** Strategic behavior in 2008 primaries by primary vote

	Percent strategic voters	Percent of those voting strategically	
		Positive strategic voters	Negative strategic voters (mischievous)
Clinton voters	20	37	47 (35)
Obama voters	21	48	31 (14)
McCain voters	25	65	11 (11)
Huckabee voters	13		
Romney voters	9		
Edwards voters	36		
Thompson voters	58		
Giuliani voters	17		
All voters	21		

*Note* Given the lack of incentives for negative votes to be cast for the uncompetitive candidates, we report only their total strategic votes. Reported in parentheses is the percentage of strategic voters for the candidate who were apparently mischievous in that they were ranked least preferred

popular vote winner, we also find that the winner of some individual states switches hands. In the first analysis, New Mexico and Texas switch from Clinton to Obama; in the second, Texas and Indiana move from the Clinton to Obama column. Again, we must be cautious in drawing conclusions about the impact on the ultimate outcome of the nomination process because the translation of votes to delegates is not at all straightforward. These were not winner-take-all contests, and, in the case of Texas, a state convention ultimately selected delegates—to say nothing of the all-important superdelegates. Even still, this calculation does at least highlight the potential for negative strategic voting to be consequential not just to our understanding of individual-level voting behavior in primary elections, but also to aggregate election outcomes.

### 3.1 Comparison with general election vote

To further validate that our classification and interpretation of strategic behavior, we next compare primary and general election behavior. The panel structure of the study offers a unique opportunity to compare the 2008 primary vote with two different measures of general election vote choice: *expected* general election vote in April and *reported* general election from the post-election survey. If we are capturing strategic behavior with our measures, we should find that those who cast a positive strategic vote are more likely to vote in the general election for the candidate they voted for in the primary, while those who cast a negative strategic vote are more likely to vote for the opposing party candidate in the general election (Kousser 2002).

A simple comparison of primary and general election votes finds that many more Clinton primary voters switched sides in the general election than either McCain or Obama primary voters. Of those voting for Clinton in the primary, 26 % voted for McCain in the general election. By contrast, just 9 % of Obama primary voters did so while 14 % of McCain voters cast a ballot for Obama. There are, however, many different explanations for this pattern. It could be that Clinton voters were disgruntled by the long primary battle and thus supported

McCain because of “sour grapes” (Pierce 2003).<sup>28</sup> Alternatively, this could reflect persuasion from the general election campaign if John McCain was especially effective at winning over Clinton voters. Certainly, there was speculation that his selection of a female vice-presidential candidate was motivated in part by the desire to win over disgruntled Clinton voters. We believe a more compelling explanation is that many of the individuals who voted for Clinton in the primary were individuals who were casting negative strategic ballots. That is, they never intended to vote for the Democratic ticket in November.

We first look to see if those who voted strategically behaved differently from those voting sincerely. We estimate multivariate models with standard controls from a vote choice model, reported in Table 3. Looking first at Model 1, we find that the political control variables are related to general election vote choice as expected, with ideologues and partisans more likely to vote for their expected candidates, even controlling for primary vote choice. Sincere primary votes are also related to general election vote choice in the expected ways. Individuals who voted sincerely for John McCain in the primary were also significantly less likely to vote for Barack Obama than those who voted sincerely for Obama (the excluded category). And despite some speculation that Hillary Clinton voters might rally behind John McCain because of sour grapes, they were no less likely to vote for Obama than were sincere Obama primary voters. However, those who voted *strategically* for Hillary Clinton in the primary were significantly more likely to vote for John McCain in the general election. Indeed, they were just as likely (if not more) likely to vote for John McCain in the general election than were those who voted sincerely for John McCain in the primary (first difference estimates of 29 vs 22 %).

The results from Model 2, where the dependent variable is general election vote preference measured in April, help to bolster the conclusion that these results are not an artifact of McCain winning over the Clinton voters during the course of the presidential campaign. Those who voted strategically for Hillary Clinton were not only more likely to ultimately vote for John McCain in November, they were significantly more likely to *anticipate* voting for John McCain 7 months earlier. It seems that many of those who voted strategically for Hillary Clinton in the primary always planned to vote for John McCain in the general election.<sup>29</sup>

We can test this more directly by rerunning the analysis on the subset of those who voted strategically for Obama or Clinton, reported in Table 4. Here we find even greater differentiation in general election voting behavior. Compared to those who cast a positive strategic vote (or could not be distinguished), those casting a negative strategic vote for Clinton were predicted to be 24 % points less likely to vote for Obama. The coefficient is sizeable and negative, but not statistically significant, for those casting a negative Obama ballot. These empirical results confirm the important conceptual distinction between negative and positive strategic voters in primary elections. And, in contrast to the expectations of previous research, we do find evidence of both types of strategic behavior

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<sup>28</sup> However, there is little evidence that Clinton primary voters were especially likely to stay home on Election Day: 5 % of Clinton primary voters did not vote, compared to 4 % of Obama primary voters and 3 % of McCain voters. See Henderson et al. (2010) for a more extensive analysis of the link between primary and general election behavior in the 2008 campaign.

<sup>29</sup> One interesting side note comes from the comparison of expected and reported behavior of sincere Clinton voters. Although these Clinton voters were no less likely than sincere Obama voters to report voting for McCain by November, in the heat of the competitive primary in April, they were significantly more likely to say they *planned* to vote for McCain than sincere Obama voters. These results are consistent with other analyses finding that supporters of losing candidates eventually rally behind the party nominee (Henderson et al. 2010). And to the extent that Obama did not win over all Clinton voters, it seems it might be because many never planned to vote for a Democrat in the general election.

**Table 3** Logit models of general election vote choice

	Vote for Obama (November 2008)	First difference	Expected vote (April 2008)	First difference
Female	-0.01 (0.15)	-0.01 [-0.07, 0.07]	0.17 (0.16)	0.04 [-0.04, 0.11]
Non-White	0.80* (0.18)	0.18 [0.09, 0.26]	0.71* (0.19)	0.16 [0.07, 0.24]
Education	0.05 (0.08)	0.04 [-0.08, 0.16]	0.14 (0.08)	0.10 [-0.03, 0.23]
Age	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.04 [-0.11, 0.03]	-0.17* (0.08)	-0.08 [-0.16, -0.01]
Income	0.03 (0.04)	0.01 [-0.03, 0.06]	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.03 [-0.05, 0.04]
Ideology	-0.84* (0.10)	-0.39 [-0.46, -0.30]	-0.96* (0.11)	-0.43 [-0.51, -0.34]
Democrat	1.35* (0.22)	0.27 [0.17, 0.37]	1.42* (0.25)	0.27 [0.16, 0.39]
Republican	-1.16* (0.24)	-0.27 [-0.37, -0.16]	-1.18* (0.28)	-0.28 [-0.40, -0.14]
Other Dem vote	-1.80* (0.46)	-0.37 [-0.51, -0.19]	-1.55* (0.57)	-0.34 [-0.54, -0.10]
Other GOP vote	-0.39 (0.48)	-0.09 [-0.31, 0.14]	-0.08 (0.50)	-0.02 [-0.26, 0.20]
Sincere Clinton vote	-0.38 (0.27)	-0.10 [-0.22, 0.04]	-0.85* (0.27)	-0.20 [-0.32, -0.06]
Sincere McCain vote	-0.95* (0.33)	-0.22 [-0.36, -0.06]	-2.16* (0.47)	-0.42 [-0.55, -0.28]
Strategic Clinton vote	-1.27* (0.37)	-0.29 [-0.44, -0.13]	-1.35* (0.44)	-0.30 [-0.46, -0.10]
Strategic McCain vote	-0.92* (0.51)	-0.21 [-0.42, 0.03]	-0.69 (0.64)	-0.15 [-0.41, 0.12]
Strategic Obama vote	-0.19 (0.54)	0.05 [-0.31, 0.20]	0.48 (0.66)	0.11 [-0.18, 0.33]
No primary vote	-0.53* (0.19)	-0.14 [-0.22, -0.04]	-0.83* (0.20)	-0.20 [-0.29, -0.11]
Intercept	0.18 (0.40)		0.05 (0.42)	
N	1470		1372	
Pseudo R-sqr	0.41		0.46	

*Note* The dependent variable in the first model is a vote for Obama (1) or McCain (0). The DV in the second model is generic vote for a Democrat (1) or Republican (0). In both models, general election non-voters and minor party voters are excluded. First differences calculated for 95th minus 5th percentile, holding all variables at population means or modes. \*  $p \leq 0.10$

in the 2008 US presidential primary. Thus, although the overall number of strategic voters—and negative strategic voters especially—was small in 2008, we contend that it is important to our understanding of primary elections to identify and distinguish them. In the next section, we look at the extent to which such behavior was predictable to help understand the conditions under which such behavior is more or less likely.

### 3.2 Electoral context

We have argued that an individual's propensity to vote strategically depends fundamentally on contextual factors that constrain an individual's motivation and opportunity to behave insincerely. Motivation is provided by the competitive context—individuals should be more likely to vote strategically if their most preferred candidate has no chance of winning or no chance of losing. Opportunity is provided by the institutional context—strategic voting should be more likely if participation rules allow an individual to easily vote in either party's primary.

To evaluate the relationship between these contextual factors and strategic behavior, we estimate a logit model predicting strategic behavior. Our dependent variable is an indicator if the respondent voted for a candidate other than her most preferred (as measured by the last survey taken before the primary in her state). We include an indicator if the

Democratic primary is open to Republicans and/or Independents.<sup>30</sup> To capture the electoral context, we include an indicator if the respondent's primary occurred after Romney dropped out and McCain became the presumptive Republican nominee.<sup>31</sup> We also include a dummy variable to capture those individuals who ranked a trailing candidate (e.g., Edwards, Giuliani, Thompson, Huckabee) as their highest rated candidate. We expect they should be more likely to vote strategically for a competitive candidate.

Because some individuals might be more or less likely to behave strategically, we include a variety of demographic and political controls: education, gender, age, race, party identification, and ideological strength. The broader research on strategic voting emphasizes that a high level of information and coordination is required to engage in strategic voting, so we might expect those who are more educated and more ideologically extreme to be more likely to behave strategically because they will be more aware of the candidates' chances and more likely to be exposed to appeals to behave strategically. On the other hand, Abramson et al. (1992, p. 60) find that education and campaign interest are not predictive of strategic behavior, concluding that "the distribution of voting types varies little with measures of political involvement." We also include a measure of electability considerations as a direct measure of propensity to behave strategically (Abramson et al. 1992). The question asked, "Which is more important to you as you think about how to vote in the primary? Choosing a candidate who shares my beliefs on issues? or Choosing a candidate who has the best chance of winning in November?" Included in the model is an indicator for those selecting the latter.<sup>32</sup> Standard errors have been clustered by state to account for any unobserved state-level variation (Primo et al. 2007). Results are presented in Table 5.

Looking at the variables capturing rules and context, the model finds support for our key hypotheses. Individuals living in open primary states and in states where the primary was held after Romney dropped out of the race were more likely to vote strategically. Holding all else constant, individuals living in open primary states are 3 % points more likely to vote strategically—a small, but statistically significant, difference.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the model predicts that individuals voting in primaries after McCain was the presumed nominee are 6 % points more likely to vote strategically. Finally, those supporting a trailing candidate were predicted to be 12 % points more likely to vote strategically.<sup>34</sup> Thus, these results suggest that

<sup>30</sup> A handful of states have different rules for each party within the state. Given our expectation that negative strategic voting is more common in the Democratic primary, our analysis codes states based on the Democratic party rules. Thus, we code as open any state that allows Republicans to vote in the Democratic primary, has no party registration requirement, allows Independents to vote, or has same day party registration (which can differ from voter registration rules in some states).

<sup>31</sup> Although McCain did not formally reach a majority of delegates until the March 4 primaries, the media began calling McCain the "presumptive" nominee after Romney dropped out (Helman and Issenberg 2008). Although rather blunt, this measure captures the key transition point in the competitive environment.

<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, this measure is far from ideal. A preferable measure of electability might ask about the perceived chances of each candidate in each wave. Although the study did ask a similar question about each candidate in wave 3, it was asked only of the subset of respondents who said they would vote in that candidate's primary—making it inappropriate for our measure of strategic behavior. Even this standard measure of electability has been the subject of considerable criticism since it is so susceptible to projection (Bartels 1987). These are two additional reasons we later focus on the always-competitive candidates.

<sup>33</sup> All model first differences and predicted probabilities are calculated holding all other variables constant at their means or modes for indicator variables.

<sup>34</sup> We reestimated the model using polling numbers as a more nuanced measure of competition with similar conclusions. The use of polling numbers, however, is complicated by the fact that competition is less easily characterized in a multcandidate than in a two-candidate race (where margin can be used) and there were no polls on the Republican side after March 4. However, replicating the model using McCain and Obama's absolute poll numbers (using 100 % for McCain after March 4) finds a positive and statistically significant coefficient for McCain's poll numbers and no relationship with Obama's poll numbers.

**Table 4** Logit model of general election vote choice

	Vote for Obama (November 2008)	First difference
Female	1.01* (0.54)	0.20 [0.01, 0.42]
Non-White	1.73* (0.89)	0.34 [0.02, 0.65]
Education	0.61 (0.38)	0.23 [-0.07, 0.62]
Age	0.01 (0.32)	0.01 [-0.23, 0.28]
Income	-0.05 (0.19)	-0.01 [-0.14, 0.14]
Ideology	-0.82* (0.39)	-0.29 [-0.56, -0.02]
Democrat	1.79* (0.90)	0.34 [0.01, 0.66]
Republican	0.76 (1.19)	0.16 [-0.25, 0.59]
Negative strategic Obama vote	-0.60 (1.01)	-0.09 [-0.45, 0.30]
Negative strategic Clinton vote	-1.86* (0.69)	-0.24 [-0.53, -0.03]
Intercept	-3.27 (1.64)	
N	97	
Pseudo R-sqr	0.38	

*Note* This model just includes the subset of those who voted strategically for Obama or Clinton. The DV is a vote for Obama (1) or McCain (0). General election non-voters and minor party voters are excluded. First differences calculated for 95th minus 5th percentile, holding all variables at population means or modes. \*  $p \leq 0.10$

contextual factors helped constrain the motivation and opportunity to behave strategically in the primary stage, above and beyond any characteristics of an individual voter.

Few of the voter characteristics are significant predictors of strategic behavior. Gender, race, age, ideological strength, and electability importance are not significant.<sup>35</sup> The most educated were less likely than the least educated to vote strategically, perhaps because the most educated were quicker to align their preferences and votes or simply reflecting the idiosyncracies of the candidate constituencies (e.g., Obama supporters were far more likely to have a college degree). The model finds that Democrats were significantly less likely than Independents to vote strategically, while Republicans were as likely as Independents to do so, a finding that is consistent with the dynamics of the race.

Looking just at negative strategic behavior, reported in column 2, confirms the relationship between strategic behavior and electoral context and rules. The model predicts that those living in an open primary state were 4 % points more likely to cast a negative strategic vote. And those voting in a primary after Romney was the presumed nominee were 7 % more likely to cast a negative strategic vote. In looking only at negative strategic behavior, the key difference from the first model is that we find that those supporting a trailing candidate were not more likely to cast a negative strategic vote—not surprising since such voters should largely be casting positive strategic votes.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> While this last variable is perhaps surprising, the measure is far from ideal—it is notoriously difficult for survey respondents to articulate the motivations underlying behavior and the other competition measures (support for trailing candidate and the time of election variable) are related to objective electability.

<sup>36</sup> Although a more extensive analysis is beyond the scope of the article, we do find interesting variation in individual characteristics of those casting negative strategic votes for particular candidates. For example, among negative strategic Clinton voters, 42 % say they watch Fox News “quite a bit” or “a lot” (another 38 % say “some”), compared to 22 % of sincere Clinton voters and even 36 % of sincere McCain voters. Among the Democrats who cast negative strategic votes for Clinton (i.e., they preferred McCain to either Clinton or Obama), only 36 % said they had a favorable view of blacks, compared to 56 % of those who cast



**Table 5** Logit models of strategic and negative strategic voting in presidential primary

	Strategic vote	Negative strategic vote
Female	0.19 (0.23)	0.01 (0.33)
Non-White	-0.44 (0.25)	-0.90 (0.56)
Education	-0.24* (0.12)	-0.12 (0.23)
Age	0.04 (0.08)	0.01 (0.12)
Ideological strength	0.19 (0.14)	0.25 (0.23)
Democrat	-1.01* (0.29)	-1.30* (0.67)
Republican	-0.11 (0.31)	-0.32 (0.48)
Open primary	0.26* (0.15)	0.52* (0.29)
Post-Romney contest	0.59* (0.17)	0.85* (0.35)
Electability important	-0.23 (0.34)	-1.05 (0.68)
Trailing candidate ranked first	0.48* (0.17)	-0.07 (0.32)
Intercept	-0.91* (0.43)	-2.25* (0.84)
N	738	738
Pseudo R-sqr	0.10	0.11

*Note* DV in the first model is the strategic vote, individuals casting a ballot for a candidate not ranked as the most favorable. DV in the second model is the negative strategic vote, casting a ballot for a candidate not ranked as most favorable *and* ranked as less favorable than the other competitive candidates. Standard errors clustered by state. \*  $p \leq 0.10$

These results are again consistent with patterns in the exit poll data, but rely on a more compelling measure of strategic behavior. In an analysis of exit poll data, for example, Donovan (2008) found that Republican crossover voters became more likely to support Clinton than Obama once it became clear McCain was the Republican nominee. The data presented here confirm this and clearly show that both the rules and context are related to the likelihood of negative strategic behavior, suggesting that negative strategic voters were making calculated decisions when casting their votes.

#### 4 Discussion

In this article, we distinguish between positive and negative strategic behavior in primary elections and do so without regard to partisanship. While both types of strategic voting involve casting a ballot for someone other than their most preferred candidate, negative strategic voters vote for a candidate they do not want to win the general election, whereas positive strategic voters vote for a candidate they want to win both the primary and general election provided that their most preferred candidate is not competitive. We found evidence of both types of voters in the 2008 election, with most of the negative strategic voting (including those apparently voting mischievously) directed at Hillary Clinton. Indeed, those who voted strategically for Hillary Clinton were just as likely to vote Republican in the general election as those who voted sincerely for John McCain.

Footnote 36 continued

a sincere vote for Clinton, 53 % of Democrats generally, and even 43 % of sincere McCain voters. The numbers are obviously small and the analysis cursory, but this is at least suggestive of some of the motivations for negative strategic voting for Clinton.

Although the overall rate of negative strategic voting was small, it does appear that the rate may have been large enough, the candidate differential wide enough, and the contests close enough for negative voting to have affected some election outcomes in the 2008 Democratic primary—in both individual states and the overall popular vote winner—even if it was clearly not consequential to the final outcome of the nomination process.

More importantly, given how little is known about how voters make up their minds in primary elections, simply documenting and distinguishing positive and negative strategic voting is a notable contribution. Our analysis helps to identify the conditions under which individuals will be more or less likely to cast strategic votes. After all, some might have assumed that this group we call negative strategic voters were really just a reflection of voter irrationality or survey measurement error, but we show that such votes are related to electoral and institutional context. Indeed, these findings add to the growing body of research illustrating that the “standard” motivations for strategic behavior are not the only tactical decisions being made by voters (Blais 2003).

Research on primary elections has long been dismissive of the possibility that primary voters might behave mischievously, yet our analysis of the 2008 primary finds that such behavior likely did occur. One possible explanation for this discrepancy with conventional wisdom is simply the unique dynamics of the 2008 race, in which one side had a long-fought competitive contest between a black and female candidate and the other side quickly winnowed to a self-described “maverick.” But another possibility is that voters have more information about the candidates and their electoral prospects in presidential primaries than in the lower level races that have been the focus of most previous research. Alvarez and Nagler (2002, p. 121) emphasize “to be a strategic crossover voter requires a fair amount of information about both the dynamics within your own party and the other party primaries and about what is likely to happen in the general election...Only when political elites, the mass media, or candidate campaigns provide these coordinate cues will there be high levels of strategic voting.” Although we are not able to test this possibility explicitly, it may be the case that the efforts of conservative pundits and bloggers (and the media coverage they generated), coupled with the overall higher levels of information about the race, makes mischievous voting more likely. As Salvanto and Wattenberg (2002, p. 126) suggest, “[W]ithout a massive and coordinated effort from thousands of voters, any single person considering a raiding strategy would probably come to see it as a wasted vote.”

Of course, we must be cautious about generalizing beyond the particular election on which our analysis was conducted. Yet, at least to the casual eye, a similar scenario seems to have played out in the 2012 Republican nominating contest with calls for Obama supporters to cast strategic ballots in Republican primaries. In announcing “Operation Hilarity,” the *Daily Kos* founder, Markos Moulitsa (2012), wrote that “It’s time for us to take an active role in the GOP nomination process...The weaker the GOP standard bearer, the better our chances in November.”<sup>37</sup> It could be the case that in today’s fully connected, information-rich society, we should come to expect negative strategic voting to become more commonplace, heightening the importance of better understanding the dynamics underlying this behavior.

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<sup>37</sup> Although the number of Democratic voters alone was not decisive in the Michigan Republican primary, exit polls reported that 53 % of Democrats cast their ballot for the more ideologically extreme Rick Santorum.

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