Appendix: Is voter participation lower in uncontested districts?

A. Elections for Illinois House of Representatives

The data includes all 118 elections for the Illinois House of Representatives between 2012 and 2020. The total number of votes cast and the number of candidates on a ballot are taken from the Illinois State Board of Elections. Voter turnout is defined as the number of votes for House of Representatives divided by the number of voting-age Illinoisans.

To investigate the impact of having only one candidate on a ballot, we estimate the following equation:

$$turnout_{i,t} = \beta + \delta\ candidates_{i,t} + \mu X_{i,t} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{i,t}$$

Where $turnout_{i,t}$ is voter turnout in district i and election year t. $candidates_{i,t}$ is a variable that takes the value 1 if an election only had one candidate on the ballot and 0 otherwise. The coefficient δ captures the impact of having additional candidates on the ballot. $X_{i,t}$ is the district median household income or the college educated population. Income and education are expected to increase voter participation. District level characteristics are taken from IPUMS NHGIS. IPUMS NHGIS provides free online access to summary statistics and GIS files for U.S. censuses and other nationwide surveys from 1790 through the present. Lastly, in separate regressions, we include α_i, district fixed effects – unobserved time invariant, and γ_t, year fixed effects which capture the effect of unobserved factors that change over time.

Dependent variable: share of eligible voters who vote for state representative			
Number of candidates	-0.09 *** (0.009)	-0.08 *** (0.007)	-0.07 *** (0.004)
District FE	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes
Observations	590	590	590
R-squared	0.31	0.63	0.91

Estimates are coefficient from OLS regressions. Standard errors in parentheses. $*p < .1$, $**p < .05$, $***p < .01$.

The results suggest that when comparing similar districts, voter participation has been lower when there was only one candidate on the ballot.

B. Elections for the U.S. House of Representatives

In this section, we estimate whether a higher share of uncontested congressional district races matters for the share of voters who cast a ballot for U.S. House of Representatives.

The data includes all elections for U.S. Congress across the 50 states between 1996 and 2018. The total number of votes cast and the number of candidates in each congressional district are taken from the MIT election data science lab. Voter turnout is defined as the number of votes for U.S. House of Representatives divided by the voting-age population in each state. Our variable of interest is the share of congressional districts with only one candidate on the ballot.

Dependent variable: share of eligible voters who vote for US congress			
Uncontested share of congressional districts	-0.20 *** (0.06)	-0.12 *** (0.06)	-0.09 *** (0.03)
District FE	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes
Observations	600	600	600
R-squared	0.05	0.26	0.92

Estimates are coefficient from OLS regressions. Standard errors in parentheses. $*p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .01$.