

Political Activists as Free-Riders: Evidence from a Natural Field Experiment

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Abstract: How do the decisions of citizens to engage in political activism depend on their beliefs about the engagement of others? We examine this question through a natural field experiment with a major European party during a recent high-stakes national election. In a seemingly unrelated party survey, we randomly assigned canvassers to true information about the canvassing intentions of their peers. Using survey evidence and unobtrusive, behavioral data from the party's smartphone canvassing application, we find that treated canvassers significantly reduce both their canvassing intentions and behavior when learning that their peers engage in more canvassing than previously thought. Treatment effects are particularly large for i) supporters who are less connected to the party and ii) for supporters with career concerns within the party. The evidence implies that effort choices of political activists are, on average, strategic substitutes, not complements.