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An empirical test of presidentialism's effect on party competition



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ABSTRACT

This article argues that party competition in legislative elections is partly a function of presidential elections. Previous research on spatial competition has assumed that parties are competing in parliamentary regimes, where the only election of concern for parties and voters is the legislative election. However, in presidential regimes, presidential elections lead to relatively centrist positioning of candidates, and coattail effects from the presidential elections help shape the legislative elections. Using data from the Comparative Manifestos Project, I show that the major parties of the left and right in legislative elections are ideologically closer to each other in presidential regimes than major parties in parliamentary regimes.

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1. Introduction

Spatial models of party competition have made many contributions to helping us understand what causes political parties to take certain positions in elections (Downs, 1957; Cox, 1990; Enelow and Hinich, 1989; Adams et al., 2005). This has especially been the case when it comes to modeling party competition in legislative elections. However, these models come with a strong assumption – that the only election occurring is the legislative election. In other words, models implicitly assume that countries use a parliamentary system.

However, in presidential regimes, most of the attention is focused on the presidential election, and not the legislative election. Scholars have discussed much about presidentialism's effects on legislative party size and fragmentation (Jones, 1994; Amorim Neto and Cox, 1997; Golder, 2006), but not about how it affects the position taking of legislative

parties. In this study, I argue that party competition in legislative elections can be at least partly driven by presidential elections. This is because presidential elections often lead to centrist electoral equilibria, and because coattail effects from the executive-level elections shape the legislative-level elections. As a result, in systems with directly-elected presidents, major parties in legislative elections will, in equilibrium, occupy a more centrist position in policy space than would parties in a parliamentary system.

Using data from the Comparative Manifestos Project, I show that major parties on the left and the right in presidential regimes are ideologically closer to each other in legislative elections than similar parties in parliamentary regimes. In addition, I demonstrate that the timing between legislative and presidential elections affects the placement of parties in legislative elections. Specifically, major parties on the left and the right will be ideologically closer to each other when the legislative election is concurrent with the presidential election. Conversely, major parties on the left and the right will be ideologically further apart from each other when the legislative election is not concurrent with the presidential election.

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These findings are important, because standard accounts of spatial competition show that parties in elections that use proportional representation or are otherwise multiparty systems position themselves in a non-centrist fashion. I show that this result holds only when the election in question occurs under a parliamentary regime. However, in presidential regimes, parties will place themselves in a centrist fashion *regardless* of the electoral system.

This analysis on the impact of presidentialism on legislative party competition becomes more important when one looks at the recent empirical evidence on the state of the world's democratic regimes. In the mid-1970's, over 60 percent of the world's democracies were parliamentary regimes. In the years since then, the number of democracies in the world has increased, primarily due to democratization coming mainly from Latin America and Eastern Europe since the 1980's. One of the results of this recent wave of democratization is that it increased the number of countries in which voters have to cast separate ballots for their head of state and their legislature. Today, two-thirds of all democracies in the world elect their presidents directly (Samuels and Shugart, 2010).¹

With this in mind, the existing set of party competition models are speaking to a smaller and smaller set of the world's democracies. This limits our ability to understand party competition across the full spectrum of democracies. This analysis therefore has normative implications as well, concerning the consequences of different types of democratic institutions. When countries modify their political institutions, voters are affected by these changes. Research shows that differing electoral rules have effects on how voters perceive electoral fairness. Namely, that proportional elections leads voters to perceive the democratic process as being fairer than in countries with less proportional elections (Anderson et al., 2005; Birch, 2008).

Changes in institutions affect voters' views toward the democratic process. If presidentialism modifies some of the effects that proportional elections have on legislative party systems, then there are implications with regards to how fair these elections are in the minds of voters. These evaluations of the electoral process are critical in countries that are seeking to consolidate democracy (Elklit, 1999). Learning more about the effects of presidentialism thus helps us understand more clearly which institutional arrangements improve the quality of democracy for their citizens.

¹ It should be noted that the stated percentage above of democracies that elect their presidents also includes the category of semi-presidential regimes. Semi-presidential regimes are considered to be hybrid systems, in which there is prime minister responsible to the legislature, alongside an elected president with a considerable amount of power (Duverger, 1980; Shugart and Carey, 1992). This type of regime has the same effect that pure presidential regimes have, in that voters in semi-presidential regimes have to cast different ballots for the legislature and the president. In addition, there are some parliamentary regimes in which there is an elected president who operates as head of state, but have little to no actual powers (Ireland, Portugal, and Austria are cases of this instance). In situations where voters are voting for a weaker president, the effects of presidential elections on legislative party competition will not be as strong. However, the fact that voters in these countries vote for a president separate from the legislature is still important, and coattail effects will still be present (albeit weaker) in these regimes.

First, an overview of previous research on spatial competition will be given. That will be followed by a critique of this research, focusing on its exclusion of presidentialism's effect on party competition. This section will also show how bringing in presidentialism has already contributed to a clearer understanding of legislative party systems. Building off of this literature, I explain that presidentialism can also help us better understand party competition in legislative election. Next, the data that is used for this study will be discussed; along with the methodology used to test the theory. This will be followed with the presentation of the results, which will also include selected real-world examples. This will provide an up-close perspective to presidentialism's effects on party competition, which complements the cross-national analysis that is the focus of this study. Finally, conclusions and limitations to the study (along with avenues for potential future research) will be discussed.

2. Previous research

Downs (1957) showed that in two-candidate elections, a spatial model was in equilibrium whenever both candidates took the same position where the median voter is located. Therefore, a candidate would be worse off if they deviated even slightly from that position. Subsequent works would focus on multiparty elections. This research demonstrated that parties could take positions away from the median voter (Greenberg and Shepsle, 1987; Cox, 1990; Shepsle, 1991).

Later work has incorporated probabilistic voting into spatial competition models. These models add a degree of uncertainty into people's votes. In the models, voters will not always vote for the candidate that is closest to them. Also, these models have a tendency to bring in non-policy factors (Enelow and Hinich, 1989) and party identification (Adams et al., 2005). Some probabilistic models show that parties place themselves away from the median voter (Dow, 2001; Schofield, 2004), while others do not (Lin et al., 1999; Ezrow, 2005). One class of models in this area describes how party activists give incentives for parties to take non-centrist positions. This is done to take advantage of the campaign resources that come with activists, such as volunteers and money (Schofield and Sened, 2005; Moon, 2004). Other probabilistic models bring in valence factors (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2000; Schofield, 2003), where voters vote based on which party can deliver better results on a given issue (Stokes, 1963, 1992).

Despite the propositions made about the centrifugal nature of multiparty elections and centripetal nature of two-candidate elections, there have been contrary claims to these effects. Namely, recent research argues proportional electoral systems do not have more extreme parties as compared to majoritarian systems (Ezrow, 2008). In addition, recent studies, primarily from the American politics literature, say that parties in majoritarian electoral systems moderate only slightly (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Gershtenson, 2004) or still experience divergence (McCarty et al., 2006).

Notwithstanding these claims, there is still evidence that there is a greater dispersion of parties in proportional

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