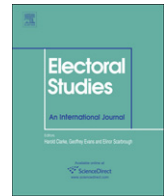




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## Marginal vote seeking in multi member districts

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### ABSTRACT

Differences in the number of seats that similar vote shares can deliver make some votes more marginal than others. In multi-member district systems, high-marginal-return votes are very volatile and research has assumed that parties do not go after them. This paper rejects this assumption, introducing a theory of marginal vote seeking across multi-member districts. By leveraging a novel mathematical algorithm and a cross sectional data set, we find evidence that parties seek marginal votes in these systems despite their volatility. In the case of the poverty alleviation programs used here, their use to attempt to secure marginal votes overwhelms the program's poverty alleviation goals. Estimates suggest that a district's share of a program's budget can increase by as much as 8% simply because of this district's likelihood of delivering marginal votes.

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*“When the moment arrives at which the decision about policy will finally be made, every member must have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal.”*

Robert Dahl. On Democracy (1998)

### 1. Introduction

Spatial modeling has been a leading research paradigm in political science since the better half of the 20th century. Although many attempts have been made towards the addition of more players to the quintessential *Downsian* two party model, only cursory attention has been paid to institutional incentives that impact the goals of these multiple players.

Votes that secure new seats have a high marginal return, while votes that don't have a low return. To gain new seats, seat seeking parties will focus on securing votes that have high marginal returns (henceforth marginal votes). The goal of this paper is to understand marginal vote seeking strategies across multi-member districts. Although these strategies have been studied under single member districts,

they have been largely ignored in multi-member ones. To reach this goal, the paper carefully examines the impact of electoral rules on the marginality of votes. This paper addresses how the electoral rules that produce multi-party races impact the marginality of votes across districts and, consequently, what parties can do to secure them.

Different vote shares have different marginal returns and I expect that parties mine these differences for electoral gain. The main expectation tested here is that parties will favor districts where marginal votes can be either gained or lost. By introducing a theory of marginal vote seeking and adopting a novel mathematical solution, I test hypotheses about which vote shares are preferred by parties and which districts, consequently, end up receiving more than their fair share of the party's attention.

To test these hypotheses, I employ a never before used data set of eight poverty alleviation programs in Latin America, which was collected specifically for this test. The evidence strongly suggests that parties are well aware of the differences in what votes can deliver and place considerable efforts towards securing marginal over non-marginal votes. Estimates suggest that a district's share of a government program's budget can increase by as much as 8% simply because of this district's likelihood of delivering marginal votes.

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The following section briefly reviews the literature on electoral strategies, paying special attention to the goals that the reviewed models ascribe to political agents. Section 3 introduces a theory of vote marginality that characterizes differences between votes and draws expectations of party behavior given the goals a party is likely to pursue. Section 4 goes over the research design for the empirical test. Section 5 analyzes the results and Section 6 concludes with a brief discussion of the research agenda's direction and future challenges.

## 2. Majority seeking and proportional representation

Spatial modeling has been the leading research paradigm in the study of electoral and legislative politics in the last half century. Arguably no political science theory has gotten as much mileage as the median voter theorem, which posits that parties in a two party race will converge to the median of the ideology spectrum. Downs (1957) median voter theorem spawned countless papers on this very topic. Some have addressed convergence while retaining the two party aspect of the theorem (Aldrich, 1983; Austen-Smith, 1984; Calvert, 1985). Others have addressed convergence in multi-party environments (Feddersen et al., 1990; Shepsle, 1991; Schofield and Sened, 2005 and 2006; Adams, 1999; Greenberg and Shepsle, 1987; McGann, 2002; Laver, 2005).

Simply put, parties have an incentive to converge because convergence increases their chances of securing a majority of the votes. Majority seeking, however, is a function of the electoral system and is an obvious choice when there are no rewards for runner uppers. As electoral rules move away from the winner take all principle, the incentive to secure a majority weakens.

Majority seeking as the only viable strategy makes sense to the extent that only majorities deliver seats, which is not always the case. Multi party systems are often a product of proportional representation and an important characteristic of this electoral system is that it rewards seats to several vote getters, not just the majority winner. Pursuing vote majorities in these environments might come at the cost of other equally rewarding strategies.

The end goal of the research agenda that this paper initiates is to produce a game theoretic model that accounts for the electoral strategies of a party in a multi-party environment. Once completed, this model will be able to identify and characterize equilibria. This model, however, is not tackled in this paper. The goal here is contained to carefully examining what this multi-party environment looks like beyond containing multiple parties. In particular, the paper sets out to understand how parties will perceive of their vote shares in an environment where plurality seeking is not the only game in town, thus rethinking the idea that a multi-party environment is just like a two party environment but with multiple parties.

As a consequence of this narrower goal, there are no further discussions of equilibria and the paper limits itself to understanding how a party perceives its vote share in this environment and irrespective of the vote shares of other parties. I recognize that parties do think about their competitors but before I can introduce this additional level

of complexity into the study, I feel it is important to carefully characterize what this environment looks like in the first place. This is a crucial step for the research agenda because, as the paper highlights, the environment is complex and warrants a thorough analysis before models that stem from it can come about.

The intuition behind the analysis carried here is simple. Parties want to secure marginal votes and will favor districts where they are close to doing so. By adopting an innovative mathematical solution that takes the number of competing parties and the magnitude of the district as an input, this paper is able to distinguish marginal from non-marginal votes and consequently identify how close a party is to them.

Parties should be sophisticated enough to recognize that given the electoral system they operate under, majority pursuit might not be the way to go. This discrepancy has gone largely ignored and is addressed head on in this paper. I expect that a party will adjust its behavior depending on what a vote share can deliver. More specifically, I conjecture that a party will address different districts as a function of what different vote shares might deliver in these respective districts. Or, in other words, a party will favor districts that are more likely to deliver marginal votes. As I show in the following section, despite their size, some vote shares have higher marginal returns than others and I hypothesize that parties are going to have the presence of mind to take advantage of these differences. More importantly, I have found convincing evidence to show that parties have both the mechanism and the presence of mind to do exactly that.

## 3. A theory of vote marginality

### 3.1. Conceptualizing different marginal returns for different votes

While democracies entail granting every citizen a vote, not all votes are worth the same. Standing between the vote and the seat is an electoral formula, which assigns different values to each vote and consequently creates a vote hierarchy (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989). Consider a disciplined party facing the choice of securing a single additional vote that can come from one of two single member districts (henceforth SMD), which can be seen as a reduced case of the choices faced by the Republican or Democratic party during congressional races. In the first district the party holds 25% of the vote share and on the second it holds 50%. An additional vote from the second district gets the party a new seat while an additional vote from the first district does not get the party anything. The vote from the second district is, therefore, significantly more attractive. Its marginal return is high (*a seat*), while the marginal return of an additional vote when a party only holds a 25% vote share is practically negligible. While the quantity of votes this party stands to gain is the same, one, the marginal return of each of them certainly is not.

By framing the discussion in terms of vote marginality, we gain traction on the discussion of the party's likely course of action. The marginal vote is ultimately the vote

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