



Distinguishing territorial structure from electoral adventurism: The distinct sources of static and dynamic nationalization



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 December 2014

Received in revised form

1 June 2016

Accepted 5 September 2016

Available online 8 September 2016

Keywords:

Static nationalization

Dynamic nationalization

Political parties

The normal vote

Electoral volatility

Ecuador

Uruguay

ABSTRACT

Estimates of static nationalization do not always reflect stark qualitative differences between parties. We use a research design oriented around a comparison of sharply different parties—the unstable Democratic Left in Ecuador and the stable Broad Front in Uruguay—to develop the distinctiveness of static and dynamic nationalization. Snapshot measures that only consider a single election suggest that both parties are poorly statically nationalized; but we show that the former case is highly statically nationalized, and that the observed territorial differences arise because it is poorly dynamically nationalized. We adopt the linear mixed modeling approach to reduce the bias in extant estimators. The approach is also informative about the sources of variance in a party's territorial support: relatively stable district attributes account for static nationalization, while features unique to the electoral cycle account for dynamic nationalization. Substantively, our study alters conclusions about parties operating in highly unstable electoral contexts.

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1. Introduction

In comparative politics, the main estimators of electoral variability (static nationalization, electoral volatility, etc.) can be misleading. They suggest, for example, that the Broad Front in Uruguay (Frente Amplio; FA) and the Democratic Left in Ecuador (Izquierda Democrática; ID) are broadly similar. Gini-based estimates of static nationalization—a concept that pertains to territorially-sourced heterogeneity in party support across districts—indicates that both are on average poorly nationalized, ranking in the second quartile from the bottom of major parties in the region (Jones and Mainwaring, 2003). Reading off each party's contribution to Pedersen's Index of electoral volatility—a concept that taps voter mobility—both score high.

Despite these apparent similarities, scholars with case knowledge of the two parties know that they are very different creatures. While it's fair to say that the electoral support for each party changes with time and is geographically dispersed, the variation in FA's support is highly systematic across space and time, whereas

there's very little that's systematic about ID's support at all.

Consider this: FA has competed in all six national legislative elections since the transition to democracy in 1984. If one were to know just three facts—the national average support in 1984, the average rate of change in its national support from 1984 to 2009, and the amount in 1984 by which its support in any one district was different from its national average support—then one could provide a very accurate estimate of its support in that same district more than two decades later. Why? Its support is highly territorially structured, and it trends simply with time and similarly across districts. It was strongest in the district of Montevideo at the transition, and it remains so today, (albeit about 25 percentage points higher, just like everywhere else in the country); it was second weakest in Lavalleja in 1989, and it is weakest there today (but again, about 25 points higher).

ID in Ecuador has also competed in national legislative elections since the transition to democracy in 1979. Yet, knowing the same three facts is of little help in predicting later support, not only in elections separated by two decades, but even in two consecutive elections. For example, in 1984, the party was strongest in Morona Santiago; two years later, it didn't even field a candidate there; two years after that, it was again strongest. In short, the electoral support of ID is highly irregular: neither strongly territorially

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structured, nor trending smoothly in districts or similarly between them.

Why don't the mainstream estimators of static nationalization and volatility offer cues to these important differences? They rate FA as somewhat more statically nationalized and somewhat more volatile than ID: is this relative assessment even correct? Are there alternative approaches which more accurately reflect the qualitative differences between parties like FA and ID?

In this paper, we address these questions by examining district-level electoral data for these two parties. We show why certain common approaches are misleading, and use an alternative modeling strategy—linear mixed models¹—to develop conclusions that can stand even under the scrutiny of case specialists. We are especially interested in improving upon the treatment of highly unstable cases like ID which are the most difficult to model because so many features of their performance are changing simultaneously.

Some of our findings are contrarian. Perhaps the most provocative of all is that despite having highly uneven district support from the point of view of a single election, parties like ID in Ecuador are relatively statically nationalized. How so? To the extent that national party leaders are able to make and break ties with voters and sub-national political leaders—shopping, as it were, freely across the electoral marketplace—territory does *not* structure their support. To be sure, this sort of electoral flexibility betrays a different form of variability (namely, low dynamic nationalization); but to the extent that estimates of static nationalization are meant to indicate durable territorially-sourced differences in support, we show that many do not properly characterize cases like ID.

Two problems afflict estimators of static nationalization which use only a single election—a “snapshot”—to draw conclusions. The first arises because they conflate different phenomena. We will show that there are two sources of the dispersion of party support across districts, but that only one—territorially stable sources of difference—pertains to the concept of static nationalization. We distinguish it from dynamic nationalization—territorial heterogeneity arising from election cycle sources of variability—and show that it does not belong within the conceptual domain of static nationalization. Morgenstern and Potthoff (2005) characterize this problem as one of bias in “unidimensional” estimators of electoral variability. Unidimensional approaches are those which estimate one form of variability without controlling for other forms of variability. Their decade old claim is serious and the bias often large in party systems with high levels and diverse forms of instability, but it has been mostly ignored by comparativists to the extent that we continue to construct the empirical foundations of our theoretical arguments using approaches that don't decompose the raw dispersion of the vote into its static and dynamic components. Pedersen's Index of electoral volatility is also unidimensional and biased.

Some snapshot approaches are based upon the Gini index, which introduces a second element which can undermine their performance as estimators of static nationalization. The Gini is a *relative* estimate of dispersion which adjusts the absolute dispersion in support by the average size of the party. This property systematically rewards larger parties with scores that suggest higher static nationalization. Given two parties with the same dispersion of district support, the larger will be scored as more statically nationalized. We will show the advantages of an *absolute* estimate of dispersion.

¹ Despite diverse terminology in naming this class of models, our approach is broadly similar to the approaches of Stokes (1965), Morgenstern and Potthoff (2005), and Mustillo and Mustillo (2012).

Our central argument is that substantive conclusions that circulate about highly unstable parties are flawed. We build our research design around FA and ID because they are instances of the extreme opposites in stability and instability; as such, it puts the contradictions that arise between unidimensional approaches and the linear mixed model approach in sharp relief. As we will show for the case of FA in Uruguay, a party's electoral support can be strongly determined by district characteristics when a party's core constituency is distributed heterogeneously across the districts. We use a time-invariant proxy for an urban, secular and union-based core constituency to account for most of FA's variability in support between districts. As we will show for the case of ID in Ecuador, even while a party can maintain relatively even national level support (and legislative representation) over many electoral cycles, tactical considerations can lead to shifting alliance patterns and highly variable electoral support at the sub-national level. District characteristics only weakly constrain ID's national ambitions.

The paper develops as follows. First, we discuss FA and ID and place them in the context of their party systems. Then, we treat the conceptualization and operationalization of static and dynamic nationalization, and review our analytic approach—the linear mixed model. Next, we report and discuss the results, and conclude.

2. The context of party competition in Ecuador and Uruguay

The substantive motivation for this project is to understand profoundly unstable patterns of party support. In much the same way that Pedersen's work on volatility was directed at modeling the new emerging instability of the European electorate of the middle 1900s (1979), scholars today are working to model the more extreme instability that has sometimes arisen in Third Wave and old democracies alike. We are not only seeing higher *levels* of electoral instability, but also *novel patterns* of instability (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2015; Mustillo, 2009).

To this end, our paired comparison of two social democratic parties from small Latin American countries offers considerable analytic leverage. It is a comparison of superficially similar cases at opposite extremes of stability and instability which is intended to demonstrate sharply how and under what conditions the various approaches to operationalization yield different conclusions, especially concerning the static nationalization of a party's support. Our main target of understanding is ID, which is poorly characterized by unidimensional estimators because there are so many dimensions of variation. FA is a carefully chosen counterpoint which appears similar, but is not. Indeed, since there is one principle dimension of electoral change for FA—it has grown—the traditional estimators of static nationalization and electoral volatility perform well.

Electoral politics in Ecuador is famously turbulent. Mainwaring and Scully classify the party system as “inchoate” (1995) and Carreras, Morgenstern and Su's examination of party system alignments concludes that Ecuador has only briefly been “partially aligned” (2015). There has been a long series of outsider and populist challengers to the party system and regime itself. Ecuador is a case where many forms of variation and change are present all at once.

ID emerged in advance of the 1979 democratic transition. It was founded by a left-leaning and reform-oriented group which split with the historical liberal party. Their ambition was to build a social democratic alternative. ID won the presidency in 1988 and was consistently strong through the 1980s and early 1990s; by 2009, it had disappeared. Relative to the rest of the party system, ID is widely considered the most programmatic and statically nationalized; yet, in broader comparative perspective, it scores low on both

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