



Electoral strategy in geographic space: Accounting for spatial proximity in district-level party competition



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ABSTRACT

How does a political party choose where to field candidates or party lists? Traditional models of party competition mainly focus on strategy: parties enter districts where they believe they could win many votes or seats. These strategic considerations are typically couched in terms of ideological positioning and the mechanics of the vote-to-seat translation at the district level. However, parties' entry decisions are also subject to geographical limitations and no prior study has explored the extent to which geography limits strategic entry at the district level. In this paper, we explore the severity of those limitations by modeling strategic and geographic factors side-by-side. In so doing, we find that geography limits parties' entry decisions, specifically by dampening the effects of strategic incentives to enter in geographically distant districts. We utilize a highly detailed district-level database of seven multimember European countries and tens of thousands of party entry decisions across these districts.

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1. Introduction

Given that a party chooses to contest some – but not all – districts in an election, how can we explain *where* it chooses to enter? Because parties that universally contest *all* districts in a country are comparatively rare, this is an important question that affects many parties around the world. For a number of reasons, these parties assess their electoral prospects differently across different electoral constituencies and ultimately conclude that some constituencies are simply not worth the time, resources, and effort of fielding a candidate or a list of candidates. Instead of contesting all districts, they forgo potential opportunities in some districts in order to more specifically chase opportunities in others.

Empirically, these parties tend to be the norm rather than the exception. A recent survey of elections in several democratic countries around the world since 1945 indicates that more than 75% of parties enter electoral districts *selectively* rather than

uniformly.¹ That is, roughly three-fourths of political parties in the world's democracies elect *not* to give every voter in the country the opportunity to cast a ballot in their favor. Furthermore, these parties are not electorally insignificant. On average, these parties entered a nontrivial share of a country's districts (about 25%) and, more importantly, these parties garnered more than 60% of all votes cast across all elections in the data set.

Previous comparative studies of electoral politics have not yet addressed the question of district-level *selective entry* into electoral competition by political parties, let alone wrestled with its implications for literatures ranging from party nationalization to models of vote choice and collective preference aggregation.² When not all voters have access to all parties on their ballots, then it becomes difficult to talk about, say, the “homogeneity” of a party's support

² Studies of the emergence of new parties (Kitschelt, 1988; Meguid, 2005; Mudde, 2007), for example, or of parties with platforms grounded in regional social cleavages (Chhibber and Kollman, 2004; Brancati, 2008), only address this question indirectly and are unable to provide systematic explanations that operate across all countries and time periods. While previous studies of resource barriers to new party emergence (Harmel and Robertson, 1985; Hug, 2001) tell us something about the impediments that parties face in deciding whether or not to contest an election at the *national* level, they have nothing to say on a district-by-district basis at the *intranational* level. Even outside of comparative studies, formal theoretical literature in the American context tends to develop logics that are problematic in multiparty settings (Callander, 2005).

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¹ Figures based on authors' original calculations across 3919 party-election observations taken from data downloaded from the Global Elections Database (Brancati, 2014). These data include parties from more than 30 democratic countries, including the subset of countries we focus on in the present study. This data will be described in greater detail below.

among voters across electoral districts (Caramani, 2000; Jones and Mainwaring, 2003) or the choices that voters make on election day (Jackson, 2002; Katz and King, 1999), or even the meaningfulness of social choice in an unbiased fashion (Plott, 1973; Chernoff, 1954). Accounting for why and where some parties will be absent from voters' ballots should allow for a deeper understanding of these national-level concepts which are so vital to the field of electoral studies.

Several empirical obstacles stand in the way, however, of such an accounting. First, although many of the factors long thought to inform entry decisions operate at the district level, most studies empirically focus on the aggregate, national level (Lago and Martinez, 2010; Selb and Pituctin, 2010). Second, although characteristics of voter and party elite preferences and strategies can reasonably be expected to affect entry choices, measuring such characteristics at the district level has proven problematic – an issue that is particularly exacerbated in the large-*n* comparative context. Finally, empirical work on entry decisions often fails to account for potential dependencies in the data, especially dependencies introduced by geographic proximity between electoral districts (Rodden, 2010; Selb and Pituctin, 2010). In this paper, our aim is to address all these concerns without sacrificing the advantages of a large-*n* and cross-national empirical study. Specifically, our contributions are threefold.

First, we offer an omnibus empirical test of the many potential determinants of selective party entry at the district level. We review a set of straightforward – but not trivial – intuitions derived from prior literature about what types of strategic considerations might drive patterns of entry. For example, parties may select those districts where they perceive themselves to be electorally viable. But electoral “viability” is a complicated concept to disaggregate and it hinges not only on electoral math, but also a party's assessment of its fit with the representational needs of voters in a district. Such issues as ideological affinity and demographic fit may come to bear on whether or not a party enters *this particular* district at the expense of *some other* district and we address each of these considerations in turn.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, we are able to demonstrate for the first time the extent to which the geographic arrangement of electoral districts modifies the above considerations. As any interview with a party operative would reveal, abstract theoretical concerns are certainly curbed by simpler logistical considerations: moving campaign resources and volunteers between districts, covering districts that exist in the same media market, and so on. These considerations would imply that, all else being equal, parties would much rather enter districts in close proximity to districts where they have already deployed resources than districts where such resources are distant. Third, we conduct all of our analyses under the umbrella of a multilevel modeling strategy. As opposed to some prior research that does not allow for flexibility at different levels of analysis, our research design pairs party-level attributes with district-level attributes and makes no *a priori* restrictive assumptions about how different parties might view the same district. Instead, we explicitly model the ways in which the *same district* can assume *different meanings* for different parties based on how that district fits into each party's unique electoral context.

Ultimately, we argue that failing to account for the geographic dimension in parties' entry decisions can lead researchers to overstate the strength of findings related to the more straightforward strategic story. To be sure, the “cost” of winning a seat, the ease of crossing that threshold, and ideological and demographic affinities are all salient and predictable determinants of selective entry. But even more, we demonstrate that these things matter especially in *proximate* districts, but almost not at all in *more distant*

districts. We test our theory on hundreds of parties and districts drawn from seven proportional representation (PR) countries across Western and Eastern Europe. By focusing on PR systems, we have constructed for ourselves a difficult environment in which to return support for our geographical argument: the conventional wisdom holds that, relative to single-member district (SMD) systems, party competition and representation in PR systems is substantially less predicated on geography. The fact that we return such dramatic evidence in favor of geography's role indicates that the effect is expected to be *even stronger* both in SMD countries as well as in PR countries with smaller average district magnitudes.

2. The determinants of party competition

Even in party systems where several party offerings are universal, many parties still contest elections by entering a subset of districts selectively – whether because they are resource-strapped, new, niche, regional, or simply en route to broader patterns of competition (Blais et al., 2011; Morgenstern and Vazquez-D'Elia, 2007). Explaining these parties' decisions, however, requires disaggregating the discussion about strategic entry from a national perspective to a district perspective (Selb and Pituctin, 2010). Prior research on party entry cast at the national level concludes that the more salient determinants of entry are things that simply do not vary across districts (Lago and Martinez, 2010). If political elites determine that their party's electoral prospects differ across districts, then we need to seek out determinants of these elite assessments that vary at the district level.

Prior literature has offered several types of motivations that might drive a selectively entering party to field a candidate or list of candidates in one electoral district at the expense of doing so in some other. In this paper, we focus on two major sets of motivations, while also controlling for additional determinants. The first motivation is *geography* both in its own right and in interaction with other types of motivations. That is to say, parties might opt for entering districts that are clustered in close proximity to one another in order to make use of organizational returns to scale with on-the-ground resource investments. Parties might also acutely respond to other strategic incentives in more geographically proximate – rather than in more distant – electoral districts. The second major motivation is *strategy* or the extent to which a party believes it can win substantial votes – and at least one seat – in an electoral district. Strategic considerations include both *supply-side* factors, such as the cost of winning a seat and the crowdedness of the district as well as *demand-side* factors such as vote volatility and wasted votes. In what follows, we review theoretical expectations from prior literature about both geography and strategy. We conclude this literature review by briefly noting the importance of controlling for the ideological and demographic makeup of individual districts when testing for the effects of geography and strategy.³

³ We grant at the outset of the discussion that there are actually three types of decisions selectively entering parties undertake on a district-by-district basis: (1) whether to enter a new district for the first time; (2) whether to re-enter a previously entered district; and (3) whether to exit a previously entered district. Our review of the literature and empirical analysis do not differentiate between decisions of type (1) and (2) and we have very little to say about (3). We do not think that the same party would have a theoretically justifiable reason to prioritize different types of considerations across (1) and (2); to do so would posit a different utility function for the party across elections or perhaps even across districts *within the same election*. Empirically, we do not possess enough leverage to adequately model decisions of type (3) because they are exceedingly rare in our database.

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