



Testing the accuracy of the Downs' spatial voter model on forecasting the winners of the French parliamentary elections in May–June 2007

Bertrand Lemennicier*, Honorine Katir-Lescieux

University of Paris Panthéon Assas, Economic Department, IRGEI (Institut de Recherche sur la Gouvernance et l'Economie des Institutions), France

Abstract

This paper emphasizes a method of forecasting electoral outcomes based on the spatial approach of Harold Hotelling and Anthony Downs' basic model of democracy. This method of forecasting the outcome of presidential elections departs from the standard approach that uses regression models of the popular vote based on a reward–punishment analysis for citizens, as well as other methods like Delphi experts surveys or futures markets for election and probability methods based on opinion polls. Anthony Downs discusses at some length the crucial role of the form of the distribution of preferences along the political left–right scale (unimodal, bimodal or multimodal) and the key role of the location of the overall median voter on this distribution in selecting the winner. The median voter theorem says the winner of the election will be the leader of the camp whose own median voter is closest to the overall median voter. We test the accuracy of this argument “à la Downs”, both on a small sample of eight French presidential elections and on a large sample consisting of the 577 constituencies of the French parliamentary election of 2007.

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1. Introduction

This paper emphasizes a method of forecasting electoral outcomes based on the spatial approach of Downs (1957) and Hotelling (1929) basic model of

democracy. This method of forecasting the outcome of presidential elections departs from the standard approach that uses regression models of the popular vote based on a reward–punishment analysis for citizens, as well as other methods like Delphi expert surveys or futures markets for election and probability methods based on opinion polls.

In his ground-breaking book, Anthony Downs wrote: “*The basic determinant of how a nation's*

* Corresponding address: University of Paris Pantheon-Assas, 12 place du Panthéon, Paris 75005, France.

E-mail address: bertrand.lemennicier@gmail.com (B. Lemennicier).

political life develops is the distribution of voters along the political scale". He discusses at some length the crucial role of the form of the distribution of preferences along the political left–right scale, selecting as the winner of the election the leader who is closest to the overall median voter. We test the accuracy of this argument “à la Downs” ex ante, on the eight French presidential elections from 1965 to 2007 (Lemennicier & Lescieux-Katir, 2007; see also the English version: Grofman, Lemennicier, & Lescieux-Katir, 2009).

It is well known that the French political system is characterized by a bimodal distribution of votes. In the case of a double ballot electoral system, this bimodality imposes a constraint on the strategy of political leaders who recognize the ultimate importance of the overall median voter. They must avoid the danger of being so oriented to winning the eventual two-candidate second round that they are eliminated in the first round; indeed, when a candidate of the right wing (the left wing) shifts his or her political platform in the direction of the overall median voter, he or she can expect to lose votes to more extreme parties of his/her own *tendance*.¹ In addition, the leader of each camp cannot depart too much from the median voter of his own *tendance*, otherwise he or she could lose too many votes to be selected in the first round, as happened in 2002 with Lionel Jospin, the leader of the Socialist party. Outcomes in the double ballot system are simultaneously affected by the location of the overall median voter and the nature of the within-bloc distribution of voter support—in particular, which bloc’s modal party is closer to the overall median voter. They must care about the median voter of their own bloc. Consequently, the winner of the election will be the leader of the camp whose *own median voter* is closest to the *overall median voter*. This distance forms the basis of our predictions. Finally, as was suggested by Jones (2008), the most important statistical problem is the small

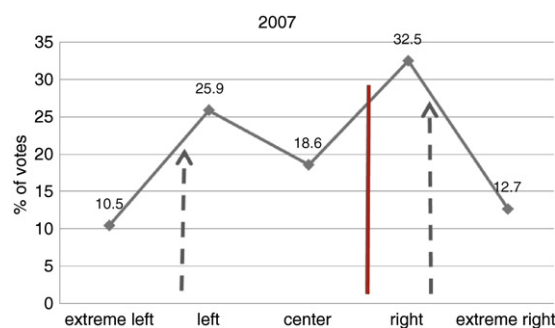


Fig. 1. Distribution of votes in the first round of the 2007 presidential election (also showing the location of the overall median voter and the median voters in the left and right blocs).

number of presidential elections. To replicate the same forecasting method on a larger sample, we test the Downsian spatial model on the 2007 parliamentary election in the 577 basic constituencies.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section describes the method; Section 3 applies the method to the election of parliament members based on the 577 constituencies, and presents the results; and the last section discusses and concludes.

2. The spatial median voter model as a forecasting method

To forecast the outcome of the French presidential election, we make use of a stylized picture of the French party space, in which we identify five political groupings in each election: extreme left, left,² right and extreme right. This picture is clearly a simplification, but it partly avoids the difficulty of locating candidates in the first round by discovering who is to the left (or right) of the other candidates of the same grouping. The five groupings give us a distribution of votes as suggested by Fig. 1. In the 2007 presidential election, the distribution of votes is bimodal, with the highest mode on the right wing. Then, starting from the extreme left (or extreme

¹ In the multiparty competition of the French double ballot system for presidential elections, where the goal is to be in the top two in the first round in order to advance to the final and determining round of balloting, the party supported by the median voter in the first round need not be a party with sufficient support to enter the second round. Later we briefly comment on how often the median party fails to enter the second (and determining) round of French presidential elections.

² However, we would emphasize that what we here labeling as the center is in fact the center right; the center left merged with the socialist party between 1969 and 1974, during Pompidou’s term as president, and no real center left party ever subsequently reemerged. Thus, when we view French politics in terms of two blocs (*tendances*), we treat the center as a component of the right; but when we do a three bloc model, the center is treated as a distinct grouping.

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