

SPATIAL COMPETITION IN LATIN AMERICA: AN OVERVIEW OF SOME ILLUSTRATIVE MODELS

Competencia espacial en América Latina. Una visión general de algunos modelos ilustrativos

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Abstract

The “spatial” theory of politics has both behavioral and strategic implications. Voters are assumed to choose the candidate or alternative “closer” to the voter’s ideal point, in a space weighted by the salience of different dimensions or issues relevant to political culture of the nation. Candidates and parties are assumed to choose locations or platforms that appeal to the center of the distribution of preferences that are effectively enfranchised by the institutions of the nation. And legislative and executive institutions must somehow shape control of the agenda, including proposal power and restrictions on domain, in ways that balance political stability and the ability of political elites to achieve their goals. This note offers examples of research that has considered the spatial model in the context of Latin America, illustrating the value of the approach.

Keywords: Spatial Competition Models, Latin America, Candidates, Parties

Resumen

La teoría “espacial” en la política tiene implicaciones de comportamiento y de estrategias. Se asume que los votantes eligen candidatos o alternativas “cercanas” a su punto ideal, en un espacio ponderado por la importancia de diferentes dimensiones o asuntos relevantes en la cultura política nacional. Asimismo, se asume que los candidatos y partidos políticos escogen plataformas o posicionamientos que tienden hacia el centro de la distribución de las preferencias representadas en las instituciones nacionales. Las instituciones legislativas y ejecutivas deben, por lo tanto, de alguna manera configurar el control de la agenda, restringir el poder, de manera tal que se produzca un balance entre la estabilidad política y la habilidad de las élites para conseguir sus objetivos. Este ensayo ofrece ejemplos de investigaciones que han considerado al modelo espacial del voto en el contexto latinoamericano, ilustrando de manera particular lo valioso de la perspectiva.

Palabras clave: Modelos de competencia espacial, América Latina, Candidatos, Partidos políticos

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The “spatial” theory of politics has both behavioral and strategic implications. It is sometimes used as a model that generates empirical predictions to be tested, and a variety of these predictions have been found to be useful in explaining behavior in a variety of contexts (for a review, see Hinich and Munger, 1997).

But the more common use of spatial theory has been as a tool of analysis, a theoretical perspective that allows researchers to investigate particular aspects of political actions and institutions. This paper offers a brief overview of some applications of spatial theory to the study of Latin American politics, at three levels of aggregation:

1. *Voters*: Voters are assumed to choose the candidate or alternative “closer” to the voter’s ideal point, in a space weighted by the salience of different dimensions or issues relevant to political culture of the nation. Thus, spatial theory is a guide to how people choose among alternatives at the ballot box.
2. *Political elites*: Candidates and parties are assumed to choose locations or platforms that appeal to the center of the distribution of preferences that are effectively enfranchised by the institutions of the nation. Thus, spatial theory is a guide to how elites choose strategies that will help them secure power, obtain favorable policy, or block political actions by opponents.
3. *Institutions*: Legislative and executive institutions must somehow shape control of the agenda, including proposal power and restrictions on domain, in ways that balance political stability and the ability of political elites to achieve their goals.

This note offers examples of research that has considered the spatial model in all three of these contexts. We recognize that our “sample” of research does not represent the full range of spatial models that have been applied to Central and South America, but we hope that the variety of work we do consider illustrates the value of the approach.

VOTERS AND VOTE CHOICE

These papers use the voters and their preferences (broadly defined) as the axis of analysis, using survey and election data. Dietz and Goodman (1987) offer an empirical analysis of social choice theory through the 1983 mayoral elections in Lima, Peru. The “space” in this example is not the traditional left-right axis, but rather a pro/anti-incumbent axis of voter preference. They conclude that Lima’s plurality mayoral election system—which gives 50% of the municipal council seats to the winner’s party—could have led to the election of a candidate who was not a Condorcet winner and thus has the unfortunate property of confounding the “will of the people.”

Morgenstern and Zechmeister (2001) explore the imperfections of standard spatial theory in young democracies. In 1997, Mexican politics had long been dominated by the PRI, and though their incumbency was far from perfect, many voters conflated the

PRI with the Mexican government and were hesitant to vote for opposition parties with no track record of good governance. Risk acceptance, they conclude, may be a better predictor of voting behavior than political preference in situations like these, common in contemporary Latin America.

The determination of voter attitudes toward free trade in Latin America is the focus of Baker (2003), which posits an answer to the seeming paradox of the popularity of free trade in countries where it has caused disemployment, economic instability and lower GDP growth. Standard labor market theories (eg Heckscher-Olin, human capital) give inconsistent answers in the Latin American context, and fail to explain why free trade is so popular when other “market liberalization” policies (privatization of state-owned enterprises, weaker capital controls) are not. He advocates a consumption theory of trade preference, where the increased and improved consumption options outweigh other, less salient effects of trade liberalization; voters are also consumers.

Groups of policies on the left/right axis are also disentangled in Zechmeister (2006), which cautions against translating traditional notions of “left” and “right” to Latin America, or even within it. Indeed, he finds that political elites are more likely to use this terminology in Mexico than in Argentina, and that Mexicans are more likely to conceive of specific policies or parties as “leftist” or “rightist.” In Argentina, these terms are more associated with valence issues (such as “fixing corruption” or “improving education”) or with non-political actors. The limitations of spatial theory to analyze populations with heterogeneous conceptions of the left/right policy space are obvious.

These papers are welcome exceptions to the deficiency that Bonilla and Gatica (2005) highlight—namely, that the literature on spatial theory (and on neoclassical political economy more generally) is not available to Spanish-speakers, and that Latin America has consequently been under-analyzed in this dimension. Bonilla and Gatica provide an excellent summary of the history and development of modern political economy.

CANDIDATES, PARTIES, AND ELITES

These papers use spatial theory to predict what actions candidates will take to gain office, and what they and their parties will do once in office. Dow (1998) takes advantage of Chile’s binominal system for electing senators to test the theoretical prediction of candidate non-convergence under a D’Hondt vote allocation system. As predicted, some of the candidates located quite far from the median voter, especially among the minority conservative coalition. The paper shows that this type of electoral scheme can lead to increased polarization and a lack of responsiveness to the desires of a large chunk of the electorate, but that these issues could be overcome by allowing citizens each an additional vote.

Bonilla *et al* (2011) also uses the rather unique landscape of Chilean politics, this time to evaluate the “freezing hypothesis” that current party cleavage lines are the result of long-term sociological cleavages. This hypothesis predicts that modern Chilean politics should see three distinct clusters of parties (the Right, Left and Center), frozen into

place from before the military dictatorship. They show that presidential candidates and their parties are actually located at two polar clusters, and that this is due primarily to elite-driven cleavage between Pinochet critics and apologists.

The internal politics of political parties is the subject of Carey (2003), Colomer (2005) and Despesato (2006). In this arena, the spatial model of candidate location is only one of several determinants of elite action, the background against which other explanatory theories are measured. In Carey, the comparison is between democratic accountability (to the voters) and party loyalty. Strict party loyalty—where legislators always vote the party line—implies a total lack of accountability. The paper examines several electoral reforms in Latin American countries that have led to increased accountability, especially the use of open primaries to weaken the power of party elites over the advancement prospects of younger politicians.

Acknowledging the unusually (from a US context) high level of party loyalty in Latin America allows Colomer to improve on pivotal actors models that had to date found little empirical support in developing democracies. A two-party (or two-coalition) system with strong discipline is found to be especially conducive to legislative gridlock. Previous formal actor models of divided government had placed too much emphasis on the “median legislator,” a concept that is less important with strong party discipline; in the revised model, the president’s party can act as a majority party with a much lower proportion of the seats, as long as that party is centrally located in policy space.

Politicians switching parties is common in some younger democracies; though this is usually written off as “weak parties,” Despesato analyses the practice in Brazil and demonstrates the incentives that determine which politicians switch, and which parties they join. Parties don’t need to be weak—they just need to be ideologically weak. Indeed, politics in Brazil is primarily about candidates’ personalities and ability to deliver either pork spending or specific policies to their constituents. Additionally, Brazil’s use of open-list proportional representation (OLPR) makes strategic party switching more likely, as it means that the number of votes required to be elected will vary from party to party, even in the same district. Party switching is a strong example of the potential importance of factors not captured by spatial analysis.

Greene (2008) examines the empirical relevancy of classic spatial theory to the strategy of a single dominant party in a young democracy using the example of the Mexican PRI. As the PRI exhausted its patronage goods and Mexico transitioned from electoral authoritarianism to real democracy, it was threatened by newer parties to the right and the left. Traditional “Downsian” spatial theory predicts that the stronger party should play defense and stick to the middle of the electorate, but Greene is more interested in what he terms “Rikerian offense”: moving towards the weaker challenger in order to prevent the development of a full-blown three party system. The PRI varied their strategy from district to district and successfully transitioned away from electoral authoritarianism without losing all of their power.

Londregan (2000) may be the single best illustration of the value of the spatial model for analyzing and explaining legislative policy-making in Latin America. He illustrates two competing narratives, or detailed “ideologies” (in the sense used by Hinich and Munger, 1994), as organizing political conflict, both in the electorate and also in the legislature. But the most important contribution Londregan makes is to trace the impact of a particular institution—the Chilean Constitution of 1980, written by the military dictatorship and imposed by fiat—on directing and constraining the set of alternatives that are available. This constitution appears to have created a setting where the military government was able to maintain control while giving up direct power, and demonstrates the power of institutions in constraining majorities. Londregan notes, in a very fair-minded treatment, that it is possible to lament restrictions on democratic process while recognizing the advantage of insulating the country from the threat of additional military takeovers.

A spatial model of competition between the Executive and Legislative branches is the focus of Negretto (2002), which examines the effect of an institution almost unique to Latin America: *decretismo*, the right of the Executive to introduce legislation. This power has generally been granted in times of economic crisis, but is often maintained and used to shift more power to the Executive branch. Negretto’s comparative analysis shows the limitations of *decretismo* in the cases of Argentina and Brazil. In the former, low vote thresholds and a strong Presidential party led to more of the *decretos* being passed, while in the latter, higher thresholds and a weaker Presidential party had the opposite effect.

Most comparative analysis of the effects of institutions on political outcomes takes those institutions as independent, explanatory variables. Remmer (2003), on the other hand, argues for endogenous political institutions as key to understanding political outcomes, and that this is especially true where there is high electoral instability—as is the case in Latin America. Remmer points out that strong incumbent parties prefer less legislative proportionality, concurrent legislative and presidential elections, and plurality presidential elections. Institutional shifts towards legislative proportionality and especially majority presidential elections with runoffs are thus caused by changes in the electorate; empirical studies that fail to take this into account have problems with endogeneity.

The institutions used by parties to select their candidates can also be analyzed with spatial analysis, as in Adams and Merrill (2008). They take the empirical fact of many parties in Latin America switching to a primary system to select candidates and derive a theoretical model in which primaries help the electoral chances of minority parties, even as they lead to the selection of candidates farther from the position of the median voter. In the model, primaries allow candidates to reveal their unseen valence characteristics—in this case, their skill at campaigning. This evolutionary process guarantees the selection of a high quality candidate, one with a better chance of beating a majority

candidate located at the position of the median voter. Their model comports with the empirical literature on Latin America, where opposition candidates selected via primary do better than those chosen by the party elite.

A more general framework for understanding legislative institutions is proposed by Morgenstern (2002, 2004). He proposes a direct comparison, controlling (perhaps imperfectly) for institutional difference, of the roll call voting pattern in five countries: the us, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. His question is whether the patterns observed are the cause, or the consequence, of institutional differences. That is, he asks whether voting patterns of parties, factions, and alliances are the reason that certain institutional features (committee systems, legislative leadership positions, etc.) are observed, or if the differences in institutions cause the differences in factions and alliances. Overall, he finds a trade-off, or perhaps a constraint, on the relation between party unity and flexibility. The Latin American experience is different, largely because the legislatures are less institutionalized, but not because Latin American members of assemblies are inherently less principled or politically committed.

CONCLUSION

The spatial theory of political competition is one of the clearest and most obviously practical advances in political theory over the past half century. The model's application to the distinct fields of voter choice, party and candidate strategy, and institutional analysis make it theoretically powerful, and the testable hypotheses it generates have shown it to be empirically sound.

Unfortunately, much of the empirical literature on spatial theory has been focused on the us and Europe. Attempts to apply it in Latin America have sometimes replicated earlier results, but just as often they have not. These discrepancies function as important robustness checks on the underlying theory, and can lead to refinements or modifications thereof, as we have seen, especially in Zechmeister (2006) and Colomer (2005). Further research in this vein is necessary to produce a truly general theory of spatial competition, rather than one that may be overspecified to the us/Europe case.

As political science can benefit from Latin America, so too can Latin America benefit from political science. Though the region saw the near universal implementation of representative democracy in the second half of the 20th century, it has yet to enjoy widespread, sustained economic growth. As Delleplane-Avellaneda (2011) argues, the adoption of the supposedly "correct" institutions (protection of property rights and enforcement of contracts) often led to political instability and dysfunction that counteracted the positive effect of these reforms. To a greater degree than perhaps any other region in the world, economic growth in Latin America is dependent on high-functioning political systems. To that end, a strong understanding of spatial theory may prove invaluable for Latin American scholars and politicians.

These two problems present the same difficulty: a language barrier. High quality empirical analysis of the region requires fluency in Spanish, and the academic literature

is almost entirely written in English. The goal of this paper is to make this body of knowledge more readily accessible to Latin American academics and their students, in the hope that they will use it to analyze their home region or country.

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