

Congress

The application to political science of Hotelling's model of spatial positioning suggests that competitive political parties will take positions on issues so as to capture the most votes. In doing so, the parties will move towards the policy position of the median voter. As a result, there will be little to distinguish these parties on policy issues. Provide theoretical reasons and empirical data to show whether or not Hotelling's model has proven applicable in American politics; you may concentrate on one branch of government, if you so choose.

In 1929, Harold Hotelling proposed a model of economic convergence and briefly applied his idea to the political realm, stating that “the competition for votes between the Republican and Democratic parties does not lead to a clear drawing of issues . . . Instead, each party strives to make its platform as much like the other's as possible” (pg 54). Hotelling reasoned that, by taking a position close to the median, a party would gain votes from moderates, but would not lose any voters at the extremes of the liberal-conservative spectrum, since these voters were unlikely to ever change parties.¹ Party convergence is a useful first approximation to understanding party behavior, particularly applications of Black's related median voter theory (1958). Unfortunately, the empirical evidence does not support Hotelling's model at the level of US Congress; moreover, theoretical arguments have been advanced that explain why we should not expect convergence.

In terms of congressional voting patterns, it is clear that Democrat and Republican politicians have not converged. Poole and Rosenthal (1997; 2007) found that after a period of coming together in the mid-twentieth century, parties

¹ Note that even Hotelling did not anticipate full convergence: he says that “excessive sameness” will result in a price war, rather than a stable equilibrium. However, any new product will likely closely resemble those already on the market, with some plausible “improvement” (pg 54).

began moving away from each other again, such that party polarization is now as strong as it was in the early 1900s (pg 107). It is hard to support an argument that parties converge on the views of the median voter, when elected leaders demonstrate virtually no overlapping ideological positions (see also Erikson and Wright 1989, who find that congressional candidate positions diverge). Additionally, in looking at party behavior in state legislatures, Gerber (1996) found that states enacted laws that were more similar to the median voter position when the state allowed for voter initiatives. Congress—obviously not faced with the threat of voter initiatives—likely behaves similarly to Gerber’s legislatures in states without initiatives. There is also evidence that Congressional parties occasionally stake a very clear claim to represent a distinct platform. In particular, the 1994 Contract with America allowed Republican congressional candidates to campaign on a platform explicitly different from that pursued by Democrats.

A factor preventing convergence in Congressional parties is that individual constituencies are not microcosms of the nation as a whole. In a game-theoretic model, Snyder (1994) shows that parties are likely to choose disparate platforms that allow them to maintain a hold on safe seats. He claims that individual interest in electoral outcomes in one’s own district trump a collective interest in expanding the reach of the party. It may be, then, that parties diverge at the national level, but that electoral competition within districts is described by convergence to an electorally-relevant district median. However, the empirical data do not support this view, either. Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001) find that convergence at the local level is, if anything, less likely than at the national level. In fact, between

1874 and 1996, only two of the 1,814 elections studied showed strong evidence of candidate convergence (pg 148). McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2007) also find that Congressional polarization stems primarily from differences in the behavior of Democrats and Republicans representing the *same* district, rather than other potential patterns that could lead to polarization. This finding indicates that, at least at the level of roll call voting after election to Congress, Democrats and Republicans are not converging at the district level.

What explains this lack of convergence? One reason is that parties are not facing a unidimensional array of issues. On one dimension, the equilibrium position for both parties to take is the median voter position (Downs 1957), but in a multidimensional space, there typically is no equilibrium (Aldrich 1995). Some predict that parties will continue to converge in the absence of an equilibrium (Kramer 1977), while other scholars have shown that when one party outperforms the other on a significant valence issue, there is an equilibrium where the advantaged party selects a moderate policy stance with the other party choosing a more extreme position (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000, McDonald and Rabinowitz 1998).

Another problem that arises when policy choices become increasingly multifaceted is the increasing difficulty justifying assumptions of full information on the part of candidates and voters. While it may seem as though candidates should have a good sense of their district's preferences, they likely do not have full information on a wide array of policy choices. For example Miller and Stokes (1963) found that although Representatives know their district's position on civil rights (a

highly salient issue), they have imperfect information about the views of their constituency on less salient issues, such as foreign policy. More recently, Butler and Nickerson (working paper) showed that state legislators were more likely to vote in line with their districts when provided survey data about their district's preferences. While national representatives may have more resources to ascertain district opinion than do state representatives, it seems unlikely that they are sufficiently informed to understand the median voter position on a wide range of issues.

Another problem with informational requirements is at the voter level. Although Downs theorized that parties will converge even when voters are not paying attention to the elections, other spatial models assume that voters are rationally choosing a preferred alternative. This assumption requires voters have clear preferences about policy positions and know the position of the two parties. This is a strong assumption, when evidence suggests that voters often lack political information (Converse 1964), frequently vote based on economic factors over which a single Congressman has little control (Mayhew 1974) or based on retrospective evaluations of policies with which the politician may or may not have been involved (Fiorina 1981), and often re-elect incumbent candidates regardless of party. Baron (1994) presents a theoretical model showing that, in the presence of uninformed voters, parties will diverge to cater to the subset of knowledgeable voters who may

take more extreme positions.² As the percentage of uninformed voters increases, so will the divergence of party positions.

Knowledgeable and active voters may also play a key role in pulling apart the parties. Aldrich and McGinnis (1989) show that there is a stable (and divergent) equilibrium even in multidimensional space for policy-motivated activists. As Aldrich (1995) notes, this activist equilibrium “has the potential for adding pressure toward divergence in a theory that otherwise mostly yields convergence” (pg 185). Indeed, Wright (1994) finds that party divergence in Congressional roll call votes is primarily due to pressure from activists within politicians’ districts or states.

In short, although Hotelling’s model may provide some intuition into how parties think about attracting voters, there are powerful theoretical reasons why this model may not apply in practice, particularly at the Congressional level. More importantly, the empirical data simply do not support the view that parties converge in their ideological positions to the median voter position, either on a nation-wide basis or in district- or state-specific contests.

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² While speaking to a slightly different point, Heatherington (2001) notes that “those who place themselves near the poles of the seven-point scales demonstrate an understanding of ideology and partisanship and hence should be more inclined to see differences [between parties] than those who place themselves at mid-scale” (625). Thus, the more partisan respondents are also more knowledgeable about ideological positions; the reverse may also be true, though Baron’s findings do not rest on this assumption.

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