

Dissertation Abstract

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Models of political competition among political parties often treat each party as a single, undifferentiated unit. In federal systems, however, a national party consists of many smaller parties competing in different regions and at different levels of government. These smaller party units face different political incentives but potentially share the same party label and platform. In my dissertation, I consider several aspects of the electoral relationship between the constituent units of these federal parties.

The first section reconsiders explanations for the empirical regularity in which political parties in government at the federal level lose support on average in subnational elections. Several explanations for this regularity have been advanced, including signaling (using subnational elections to reveal private information to federal incumbents), balancing (using subnational elections to average policy outcomes across levels of government), and retrospective voting (using subnational elections to punish federal incumbents for observed poor performance). The intuition behind these latter two explanations has been fairly well formalized, but models of signaling in elections are far less developed. I construct simple models of signaling in subnational elections, considering cases where voters have private information about their policy preferences or about their evaluation of government quality. These models identify the conditions under which voters can credibly convey their dissatisfaction with the federal incumbent party, producing empirical implications that should appear in aggregate election results.

The second section evaluates the empirical evidence in support of various explanations for electoral losses by federal incumbent parties in subnational elections, finding support for the signaling models developed in the previous section. Discriminating among these theories is difficult because they imply deviations from the unobserved normal vote for the party in the absence of punishment behavior. In particular, signaling explanations imply that electoral punishment is a function of voter evaluations that are not observed by politicians or, by extension, analysts. To model these unobserved quantities, I use a Bayesian dynamic linear model to estimate the normal vote for a party in each unit augmented with a mixture model to test for evidence of punishment and non-punishment regimes in subnational elections as predicted by the signaling models. Using data from Germany, Australia, and Canada, I find that the evidence is more consistent with electoral punishment as a form of message-sending than it is with balancing or retrospective voting.

The third section turns to a different aspect of the relationship between state and federal parties. I construct a model of the tradeoff facing state parties between the efficiency gains in joining a federal party and the competitive advantage of retaining an autonomous identity. The model implies that politicians in subnational units with extreme preference distributions relative to the federal level are more likely to form independent parties. I use a hierarchical Bayesian model to estimate the distribution of preferences in subnational units in Canada and Australia. Comparing these preference distributions to the pattern of party aggregation in Australia and Canada shows that efforts to form independent subnational parties are strongest in units with unusual preference distributions, such as Queensland or Saskatchewan.