

# DOWNNS AND TWO-PARTY CONVERGENCE

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Bernard Grofman

*Department of Political Science and Institute for Mathematical Behavioral Science,  
University of California, Irvine, California 92697; email: bgrofman@uci.edu*

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■ **Abstract** We take as our starting point the insights of Downs (1957) into two-party competition. A careful reading of Downs offers a much more sophisticated and nuanced portrait of the factors affecting party differentiation than the simplistic notion that, in plurality elections, we ought to expect party convergence to the views of the median voter. Later scholars have built on Downsian ideas to see what happens vis-à-vis party differentiation when we modify key assumptions found in the basic Downsian spatial model. Recent work allows us to turn what is taken to be the Downsian view on its head: Although there are pressures in two-party competition for the two parties to converge, in general we should expect nonconvergence. Moreover, contra the negative portrait offered by Green & Shapiro (1994) of the limited or nonexistent value of research on party competition models in the Downsian tradition, we argue that, when viewed as a whole, neo-Downsian models—especially those of the past decade—do allow us to reconcile theory and data in terms of a multi-component theory of party competition with testable implications for comparative statics.

## INTRODUCTION

The simple Downsian model of two-party competition under plurality is generally characterized as predicting party convergence to the policy position espoused by the median voter, and thus “Tweedledum-Tweedledee” political competition; yet this prediction violates empirical reality even for the United States, the country whose electoral politics provided the empirical inspiration for Downs’ work (Frendreis et al. 2003; Stonecash et al. 2003). For example, when a given constituency elects members of opposite parties (e.g., when a congressional seat changes hands to a member of the opposite party, or in states that are simultaneously represented by senators of opposite parties), the difference in voting records (as judged, say, by ADA scores) between the office-holders of different parties can be huge (Bullock & Brady 1983, Erikson & Wright 1997, Fiorina 1974, Grofman et al. 1990, Poole & Rosenthal 1984). This discrepancy between model and reality has led some scholars (e.g., Green & Shapiro 1994) to argue that rational choice modeling of party competition is empirically vacuous.

Yet the standard Downsian convergence result (Downs 1957) rests on more than a dozen specific assumptions, such as the assumptions that parties/candidates are motivated solely by office seeking and that voters choose solely on the basis of their policy proximity to candidates' positions. As this essay will show, when one or more of these assumptions is violated, the usual convergence result can often be expected to disappear. Moreover, we no longer get other unrealistic predictions from the Downsian approach, such as the expectation that elections would be decided by relatively narrow margins because candidates of the two parties would be identical in their only relevant attributes (i.e., their policy platforms or anticipated policy choices).

There have been a number of different approaches to accounting for candidate/party divergence in plurality-based elections. Often scholars seize upon one single explanatory factor. Our purpose here is not to provide new results but rather to provide a synthesis that reveals how a whole series of disparate results about divergence, especially recent results, can be integrated into a common framework to instruct us about which of the basic assumptions of the standard Downsian model should be replaced (see also Adams et al. 2004, especially Ch. 4; Grofman 1993, 1996). Almost any violation of the basic assumptions used by Downs to generate the two-party convergence result is likely to replace convergence with some degree of divergence in party positions.

The basic assumptions of the standard Downsian model are as follows:

1. There are only two political parties.
2. There is a single-round election for any office.
3. The election chooses a single candidate.
4. Elections take place within a single constituency.
5. The election is decided by a plurality vote.
6. Policies can be located along a single (left-right) dimension.
7. Candidate policy positions are well defined.
8. Candidate policy positions are accurately estimated by each voter.
9. Voters look no further than the next election.
10. Eligible voters go to the polls if the expected benefits of their vote's contribution to the election of the candidate for whom they would vote exceed the "costs" of voting.
- 11a. Voters care only about which candidate/party will enact policies closest to their preferences. They vote for the candidate closest to their own policy location.
- 11b. If there are no policy differences among the candidates/parties, then voters will be equally likely to support each of the candidates/parties.
12. Parties/candidates care only about winning.
13. Parties/candidates look no further than the next election.

14. Candidates/parties accurately estimate the policy preferences of voters, or at minimum, they can identify the location of the median voter overall and the median voter in each party.
15. Candidates are part of a unified party team.

By seeing what can happen to convergence when we replace one or more of the above assumptions with more realistic ones, we can assess how much convergence we might expect. Moreover, we can begin to identify the factors with the greatest impact on the degree of divergence (Adams et al. 2004). When we examine recent work modeling the forces that affect party convergence, we see that the standard view of the Downsian model as predicting convergence in two-party political competition gets it almost completely wrong. Yes, there are centripetal pressures; but in general they are partly or largely outweighed by the centrifugal ones, producing what my coauthors and I have labeled “spaced out politics” (Adams et al. 2004).

To simplify the exposition, this essay discusses the implications of violating individual assumptions while leaving other key assumptions intact. Although our focus is on two-party competition under plurality, and we take almost all of our illustrations from the United States, most of the ideas below are in no way restricted in their applicability to the United States, and may be extended to the multiparty-competition setting under various electoral systems (Adams et al. 2004).

## MODIFYING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STANDARD DOWNSIAN MODEL TO POTENTIALLY PERTURB THE CONVERGENCE RESULT

### More Than Two Parties

The basic Downsian model posits the presence of only two parties. However, since Downs also posits plurality-based elections, assuming two parties may not be unrealistic. There is a strong theoretical argument—involving a psychological effect and a mechanical effect—that a system of plurality-based elections in single-member districts leads to two-party competition (Duverger 1959, 1986; cf. Riker 1982a). Yet, in real-world politics, plurality-based elections do not necessarily generate pure two-party competition, even at the district level (much less at the national level); only the United States nearly perfectly fits this prediction (see especially Gaines 1999). But in the United States, the two major parties often collude to adopt formal rules that hinder the entry of new parties. Also, in the United States, special factors (such as a presidential system based on state-specific electoral college outcomes) enhance the incentives for candidates to run under the label of one of the two major parties.

When we have more than two parties, even with plurality-based single-member district elections, the basic Downsian convergence argument no longer goes through. Until quite recently, modeling of multiparty competition with open entry either did



uniform distribution of voter ideal points over the  $[0, 1]$  interval. Where must the median voter in each of the two parties be located in order to achieve an equilibrium of the type described above? If the voter is located at  $x$ , for a uniform distribution, the median voter in his own party would be located at  $0 + x/2$  and the median voter in the other party would be located at  $x + (1 - x)/2$ . Therefore, we set

$$x - x/2 = x + (1 - x)/2 - x.$$

Solving, we obtain  $x = 1/2$ , and so the two party medians are at  $1/4$  and  $3/4$ . For virtually all distributions, we find that, under the McGann model, two parties will always be differentiated in a way that resembles what Merrill & Grofman (1999a) call "moderate extremism." [A closely related model has been offered by economists Osborne & Tourky (unpublished manuscript, 2002).]

Two-stage electoral processes create an important check on the centripetal forces identified by Downs even if voters (and candidates) see the two stages as intertwined. Unidimensional two-party competition in an electoral system with both a primary election and a general election gives rise to party divergence if we posit that the ideological position that a candidate claims in the primary is the one he or she is stuck with in the general election as well (cf. Bernhardt & Ingberman 1985), so that candidates must seek positions that will win them *both* elections. It also generates divergence if voters have policy preferences that lead them to maximize expected benefits, i.e., if voters not only consider the desirability of a given candidate of their own party (relative to that of the candidate of the opposite party) but also consider that candidate's apparent likelihood of winning the general election. In a two-stage electoral process (nomination plus general), the extent of between-party divergence is conditioned by the underlying nature of the distribution of voter ideal points and the assumptions we make about how voters are aggregated into parties.

These points are central to two models of two-party divergence offered in the early 1970s (Aranson & Ordeshook 1972; Coleman 1971, 1972) that have largely been neglected ever since. Both these models generate predictions that the location of the candidates chosen by the primaries in each party will be somewhere between the party median and the overall median (cf. Cooper & Munger 2000).

Aranson & Ordeshook (1972) make candidate choices the focus of their modeling. In their model, voters (both in the primary and in the general) always vote for the candidate closest to them, but candidates are assumed to develop expectations about the probability of victory in the primary election ( $P_1$ ) and the general election ( $P_2$ ) as a function of the policy position they adopt, and are posited to choose a spatial location that maximizes  $P_1 \times P_2$ .

In contrast, the Coleman (1971, 1972) model focuses on voter motivations. In the Coleman model, some or all voters in the primary election care not only about the candidates' policy positions but also about the victor's ability to win the general election, and these voters choose among candidates accordingly. Roughly speaking, Coleman assumed that voters maximize a function that can be thought of as the benefit derived from selecting a party representative whose location is close

to their own ideal point discounted by the likelihood that such a candidate will be elected in the general election. The Coleman model has been further extended by Owen & Grofman (1995), who show that the degree of divergence is linked to the degree of kurtosis in the ideological distributions of the two parties.

In a two-stage electoral process (nomination plus general), the extent of between-party divergence is also affected by the exact nature of the party nominating process. For example, Gerber & Morton (1998) and Grofman & Brunell (2001) show evidence that increasing the openness of primaries reduces the ideological differentiation between the two parties (see also various essays in Cain & Gerber 2002). The presence of a voter "wish-fulfillment" bias (Granberg & Brent 1980) may also enhance the impact of primaries on divergence of political competition. Consider, for example, the belief of Barry Goldwater's Republican supporters in 1964 that there was a "conservative majority" available for mobilization by a candidate expressing the "right" views (cf. Uhlaner & Grofman 1986).

### More Than One Candidate Chosen Simultaneously

The Downsian assumption that a single election chooses a single candidate is not always applicable. With multiple elections for different offices within single-member district constituencies, voters may choose to "policy balance" across different elections, seeking to elect an implicit "slate" that is closest to the voters' own policies. Fiorina (1992, 1996) and Alesina & Rosenthal (1995) argue that voters ticket-split in order to elect a "set" of officials that is more likely to achieve policies preferred by the voter. For example, if slightly left-of-center voters who generally support Democratic candidates see (or expect to see) a Democrat in the White House, they may now wish to vote for a conservative Republican for the House of Representatives in an attempt to move overall policies slightly to the right, closer to their ideal point than would be obtained were the federal government unified under either a Democratic (leftist) or a Republican (rightist) regime. If voters "balance" across elections, then there may be support for nonmedian parties to counterbalance other nonmedian parties. The balancing literature has not yet satisfactorily established how to discern what set of elections voters are supposed to be balancing over, and how voters weight the results in the different electoral arenas.

### More Than One Constituency

For plurality-based elections, Austen-Smith (1984) performed one of the earliest examinations of the implications of concurrent competition in multiple constituencies for two-party unidimensional competition under the Downsian model. But assumptions other than those used by Austen-Smith can lead to different conclusions, especially once we recognize that the location of the median voter will differ across constituencies, so that no single party position is optimal in all constituencies. Assume each party's candidates must take the same position as their national party. Now, were the national party to stake out a policy position designed to make very likely wins for its candidates in some constituencies, while largely conceding

a portion of the other constituencies to their opponents, parties could be assured that, no matter how unfavorable general circumstances might be (e.g., a scandal or being blamed for poor economic performance) there would always be some seats so safe that they would remain in party hands regardless of electoral tides.

## Election Not Plurality-Based

In modeling party competition, we need to understand how many parties we ought to expect and where they are. Shifting from plurality to, say, list proportional representation (PR) will certainly change the incentives for party entry. In general, for PR elections we expect greater incentives for multiparty competition than under plurality (Duverger 1959, 1986; Taagepera & Shugart 1989). Party proliferation under a given electoral rule is linked to the “threshold of exclusion” of that rule, i.e., the largest size that a party can be and still be denied seats (Lijphart & Gibberd 1977, Loosemore & Hanby 1971). The threshold of exclusion is expressed as a function of the number of representatives elected from each district (i.e., in terms of what is commonly called district magnitude). In general, the more parties there are, the greater the expected ideological range of party locations. However, whether electoral systems have a further independent effect on party convergence once we control for both the distribution of voter ideal points and the number of parties remains an open area of investigation (see, e.g., McGann et al. 2002).

## More Than One Policy Dimension

The basic Downsian model locates policy platforms along a single (left-right) dimension. One obvious way to extend the Downsian model is to consider multiple dimensions of issue competition.

A generally neglected aspect of Downs' (1957) work, highly relevant to party divergence, is the possibility of putting together winning coalitions based on minority groups with intense preferences on particular issue dimensions. Relatedly, Petrocik (1996) has emphasized that, in the United States, certain issues have come to be “owned” by one party, i.e., that party is more credible in claiming positions on the issue. For example, Republicans are more credible in claiming to be anticrime, whereas Democrats are more credible in claiming to be concerned about affordable health care. In multidimensional issue competition, parties may compete not by converging to similar positions but, rather, by emphasizing the importance/salience of the distinct issues which give them the advantage with the voters (Feld & Grofman 2001; Hammond & Humes 1993; M. Humphreys & J. Garry, unpublished article). Perhaps the central finding of the largest cross-national study of party platforms, the Party Manifestos Project, is that “parties compete by accentuating issues on which they have an undoubted advantage, rather than by putting forward contrasting policies on the same issues” (Budge et al. 1987, p. 391; see also Budge & Farlie 1983). Wagemans (2001), following Budge & Fairlie (1983), calls this a “salience theory” model of party competition. One implication of salience theory is that parties will appear to diverge, since there is no reason to expect that

the optimal campaign strategies of both parties will emphasize winning the votes of the same groups of voters or appealing to the same interest groups.

In most neo-Downsian models of party location, the predicted relative magnitude of the centripetal and centrifugal forces that affect party location varies with the assumptions we make about the underlying dimensionality of the issue space. It matters considerably whether we seek to model convergence in a single dimension or assume a multidimensional issue space. Equilibrium results are much easier to generate in the unidimensional case. For multidimensional issues spaces, most models of the 1970s and 1980s predicted instability (see, e.g., McKelvey 1976, Riker 1982b). But longitudinal patterns of party competition in most countries in the Party Manifestos data set (Budge et al. 1987) do not resemble random walks over issue space, nor do they look like convergence to the center of the ideological space (e.g., near the generalized median). Rather, each party seems to confine itself to a relatively small section of the issue space, usually one distinct from those of other parties. In the United States, even when we measure multiple dimensions, we still get nonconvergence. For example, as part of the European Party Manifestos Project (Budge et al. 1987), when Robertson generated a two-dimensional factor-analysis-generated issue space for the United States, 1948–1980, based on party platforms, the Democratic and Republican Parties remained in distinct areas of that issue space (Robertson 1987: Figure 3.1, p. 69).

Because our focus is on unidimensional two-party competition, we do not review recent work on multidimensional multiparty competition here. We would, however, call the reader's attention to work on the "heart" by Schofield and colleagues (e.g., Schofield 1996, Schofield et al. 1998a,b); to work by Laver & Shepsle (1994, 1996) on choice over a multidimensional lattice that builds on Shepsle's earlier work on the partitioning of multidimensional issues into a sequence of (orthogonal) unidimensional choices (see, e.g., Shepsle 1979, Shepsle & Weingast 1981); to Shvetsova (2002); and to the modeling efforts of Adams and Merrill (see especially Adams et al. 2004).

## Ambiguous Policy Positions of Candidates

A candidate can blur his policies to appear more centrist than they really are. Early work by Shepsle (1970) dealt with the consequences for candidate success of taking ambiguous stands. Bowler (1990), Page (1976), and Husted et al. (1995) worked along closely related lines. In general, we would expect the potential for candidate ambiguity to allow greater candidate differentiation (see especially Aragonés & Neeman 2000). In particular, Berger et al. (2000) offer a two-candidate model in which, if voters are uncertain, but one candidate is of lower variance in expected policy location than the other, we expect some degree of divergence of equilibrium policy platforms. Even if there is no explicit attempt at deception, platforms may be "noisy," with many voters incorrectly assessing candidate locations; even such "random" misperceptions can affect optimal party strategies (Calvert 1985, Lagerlöf 2003, Roemer 1994).

## Votes Based on Perceived Characteristics of Each Party's Support Collections

Undecided voters pay attention to the characteristics of the supporters of each candidate/party. They may choose not to vote for parties whose supporters are types of voters (or interest groups) they do not like. In other words, party competition may be based on voters' closeness to the set of voters whom they expect to be in each candidates' support coalition (Glazer et al. 1989; cf. Aldrich 1983, Aldrich & McGinnis 1989). Under these assumptions, party positions may diverge (Owen & Grofman 1995).

Also, as noted above, because, for historical or other reasons, parties may be differentially credible with different groups (e.g., antiabortion activists or strong feminists), there is no reason to expect that different interest groups will contribute equally to each party. Although concern for "access" may tilt contributions toward the party in power, *ceteris paribus*, each group will tend to give more funding to the party whose candidates are more likely to sympathize with its cause. If money and direct campaign support translate into votes, then the existence of such differential contribution bases leads to policy divergence (cf. Miller & Schofield 2003).

## Voters Look Beyond the Next Election

A complication suggested by Downs himself that would lead to a greater role for the policy positions of party supporters is the possibility of "extremist" voters choosing not to vote for the candidates of the party they would otherwise support if they feel it has become too centrist. Often voters of an extreme ideological point of view may take policy concerns more seriously than more centrist voters. One way extremist voters might choose to punish a party that has moved too far from them is to vote for a candidate of a minor party with no possibility of winning whose policy positions they admire. Such behavior on the part of extremist voters is often intended to scare a party into returning to a more ideologically pure position by highlighting the importance of support from the party's most ideologically committed members. On the other hand, K. Shotts (unpublished manuscript) has recently turned this argument on its head by showing that voters who are moderate (relative to the set of party loyalists) may also wish to abstain in order to force their party away from extreme positions. However, we suspect policy-oriented abstention is a more likely strategy for extremists than for moderates.

## Turnout Does Not Depend on Voting Costs Versus Expected Benefits

The standard Downsian model holds that voters go to the polls if the expected benefits of their vote's contribution to the election of their preferred candidate exceed the "costs" of voting. Instead or in addition, voters may abstain if the choice closest to their policy position is too far away. According to Downs, if the ideological distribution of voters is bimodal and if abstention by extremists is

practiced, “a two-party system need not lead to the convergence on moderation that Hotelling and Smithies predicted” (Downs 1957, p. 118). There have been several attempts to make this intuition more precise, beginning with Garvey (1966). The most extensive work in this area is by Adams (2001b, Adams & Merrill 2003; see also Adams et al. 2004). The basic idea is simply that voters who are alienated from politics because no candidate is close to their preferred position might choose to abstain. This may happen even if voters are not seeking to influence the party’s future behavior. If parties fear abstention by party loyalists, that fear may push them back toward the median voter in the party and away from the overall median voter.

Even if they do vote, if campaign activists’ support (e.g., donated time and money) is critical to electoral success, then activists’ lack of enthusiasm for candidates whose positions diverge from the party median can force a party’s candidates to move away from the overall median voter in the constituency. Because of their potential contributions of money and time and their threat of nonparticipation (even if implicit), we can expect that ideologically extreme supporters of a party, from whose ranks activists are disproportionately drawn, will exert more influence on the policy location of their party’s candidates than other voters (Aldrich 1983).

## Candidate Policy Location Does Not Determine Voter Support

**GENERAL BIASES LEAD VOTERS TO SUPPORT A PARTICULAR CANDIDATE** Instead of caring only about which candidate/party will enact policies closest to the preferences of the voter, voters have general biases that lead them to support particular candidates (e.g., incumbents or candidates perceived as particularly competent or trustworthy) as long as the candidates of the opposite party are not too much closer to the voter’s own preferred position(s). Nonpolicy concerns were introduced into the voter calculus by various authors, perhaps most notably Enelow & Hinich (1982; see also various essays in Enelow & Hinich 1984, 1990). If nonpolicy factors give one party an edge, this can have important implications for party differentiation. One example of this line of work is Feld & Grofman’s (1991) effort to model the nature and effects of incumbency advantage.

Feld & Grofman (1991) posit a bias in favor of the incumbent such that a voter sympathetic to that incumbent will not vote for another candidate unless the (foreseen) policy positions of the rival candidate are substantially closer to the voter, i.e., voters give the incumbent a “benefit of the doubt.” Feld & Grofman show that, if the candidate who enjoys the benefit of the doubt is vulnerable at all, the only locations that can defeat him are ones that are nonidentical to his own. Indeed, the greater the benefit of the doubt, the further away must be any location that can defeat the incumbent. They show that if the benefit of the doubt is great enough, or if there is a very large benefit of the doubt from a relatively small set of randomly distributed voters (e.g., as a result of constituent services provided to a random subset of the voters), then a centrally located incumbent can become invulnerable to defeat even though, without benefit of the doubt, the voting game

would lack a core.<sup>1</sup> Under these circumstances, a candidate who is more extreme than the median preference in the electorate can nonetheless be reelected because of a combination of nonpolicy considerations and benefit of the doubt.

Another model of what happens when voters incorporate nonpolicy considerations is by Enelow & Munger (1993). They show that differences in candidate reputation can lead to nonconvergence of optimum candidate locations (see also Bernhardt & Ingberman 1985). Recent work (e.g., Adams et al. 2004, Groseclose 2001, MacDonald & Rabinowitz 1998) has confirmed the general result that nonpolicy considerations in voter decision making will often lead to a stable pattern of party divergence.

M. McDonald (personal communication, 1999) makes the closely related point that, when the electorate is highly partisan, candidates will exhibit divergence because they can do so with little loss in their probability of winning. As the electorate becomes less partisan, then the candidates will track the median voter more closely.

**PARTISAN BIAS LEADS VOTERS TO SUPPORT THEIR "OWN" PARTY** Above we have considered how candidate-specific nonpolicy factors may affect divergence; now we turn to party-based effects. Instead of caring only about which candidate/party will enact policies closest to the preferences of the voter, voters have partisan biases that lead them to support candidates of their "own" party as long as the candidates of the opposite party are not too much closer to the voters' own most preferred positions. For example, it makes sense to think of party supporters as developing a degree of brand loyalty, based on past party performance (Fiorina 1981), previously staked-out party positions (Shepsle 1991, pp. 42–43), or generationally linked patterns of partisan loyalty. It is easy to imagine situations in which this partisan loyalty induces a bias in voter choice (Grofman 1987) similar to what Feld & Grofman (1991) posit in the nature of incumbency effects. Adams (2000, 2001a,b; Adams et al. 2004; Merrill & Adams 2001; cf. Lindbeck & Weibull 1993) shows that, when voters prefer the candidate of their own party to that of the other party as long as their own party's candidate is not substantially further away from them (in policy terms) than is the opposing candidate, such bias can induce policy divergence.

**VOTERS' CHOICE ANTICIPATES POLICY CHANGE** Instead of caring only about which candidate/party will enact policies closest to their preferences, voters may base their choice on the direction in which candidates will take policies, or on discounted expectations of policy change. Largely motivated by the theoretical and empirical difficulties with the Downsian proximity model, an alternative spatial model of voter choice, the directional model, has recently been proposed by Rabinowitz et al. (Listhaug et al. 1994a,b, MacDonald et al. 1991, Rabinowitz & MacDonald 1989). The intuition underlying this approach is that "voters do not have preferences for particular policies; they simply have general preferences

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<sup>1</sup>A "core" is a solution that would give rise to no further incentives for any party to move.

for the *direction* they would like policies to go” (Macdonald et al. 1991, p. 25, emphasis added). Voters choose the party that will move policies in a direction that is closest to the direction of change desired by the voter. The Rabinowitz & MacDonald model is defined in terms of directional change from a neutral (zero) point on the issue dimension(s).

The choices made by voters choosing directionally need not be identical with those of voters choosing on the basis of policy proximity, although, at least for two-party competition, for most voters, the two models are likely to yield identical predictions. The Rabinowitz & Macdonald model can be shown to imply that parties will take noncentral positions (Merrill 1993, Rabinowitz & Macdonald 1989) even when elections are plurality-based. Because the pure form of the directional model has some unrealistic implications (Merrill 1993), attempts have been made to modify it to incorporate Downsian proximity elements (Iversen 1994; Merrill 1993; Merrill & Grofman 1997a,b, 1998, 1999a). Such a unified model tends to lead to limited divergence.

Another spatial variant (Grofman 1985) is premised on the idea that voters discount promises made in party platforms based on the expected actual movement from the status quo that is likely to be achieved were a particular candidate/party to achieve office. Grofman’s model emphasizes the importance of the location of the status quo point in shaping voter choices—something totally neglected in the standard proximity model—but its logic is otherwise consistent with that of the standard proximity model. Like the Rabinowitz & MacDonald directional model, the discounting model has the property that, even in one dimension, optimal party strategies need not be convergent. However, in unidimensional two-party competition, it predicts moderate divergence rather than extreme divergence (Merrill & Grofman 1997b, 1999a). Grofman’s model has been shown (Merrill & Grofman 1999a) to be a special case of the mixed directional and proximity model offered by Iversen (1994) and has recently been incorporated into models with nonpolicy components by Adams et al. (2004).

## Candidate Policy Location Does Dictate Voter Support, But Voting is Probabilistic

It is possible that even if voters do care only about which candidate/party will enact policies closest to their preferences, voters choose probabilistically rather than deterministically. “Probabilistic voting” means that a given party is not chosen with either probability zero or probability one, depending on relative proximity to the voter’s ideal point; instead, the likelihood that a voter will choose a party is some (monotonic) function of how much closer that party’s policy location is to the voter than the position(s) of the other party(ies). Hinich (1977) provides a model of two-party competition under probabilistic voting in which parties converge to the mean voter location rather than the location of the median voter. It appears to be much easier to get equilibrium results under probabilistic voting than under the more usual deterministic approach (Adams et al. 2004). Moreover, not all probabilistic

models of two-party competition yield convergence. For example, Cox (1987) provides a probabilistic model of two-party unidimensional competition in which rational vote-seeking politicians have an incentive to avoid coming together at the median (see also Adams et al. 2004, Cox 1990, Eaton & Lipsey 1975).

### **Voters Inaccurately Estimate the Policy Platforms of Candidates/Parties**

The standard assumption is that voters accurately estimate the policy platforms of candidates/parties. Instead, systematic perceptual biases lead to projection effects. There is a limited but important literature on perceptual bias in voter choice (among the most important works are Granberg & Brent 1980, Granberg & Holmberg 1988, Markus & Converse 1979, Page & Jones 1979). The basic idea is simple: Voters who have preferences for candidates/parties rationalize those preferences by two kinds of projection effects. On the one hand, they assimilate the position of favored alternatives, bringing them closer to their own views, and on the other hand, they contrast the views of disfavored alternatives by projecting them further away than they actually are. In general, such effects will allow greater party differentiation (Adams et al. 2004, Ch. 10; Merrill et al. 2001).

### **Parties/Candidates Care About Policy, Not Just About Winning**

We may expect that parties/candidates have policy-oriented concerns of their own, just as voters/activists do, and are not solely concerned with winning elections. If candidates have policy preferences, we would expect to see a self-selection into the ranks of candidates of each party that mirrors the policy stances of voters of that party but is even more extreme. For two-party competition, the role of party activists, when combined with primaries and with the importance of durable “party images,” virtually guarantees a self-selection and weeding-out process in which candidates gravitate to and are chosen by the party whose policy positions most resemble their own.

Chappell & Keech (1986), Cox (1984), Hansen & Stuart (1984), Holler (1978), and Wittman (1973, 1977, 1983), among others, have modeled two-party (unidimensional) competition as one in which parties (or candidates), rather than merely seeking a vote-maximizing location as in the classical Hotelling-Downs framework, trade off the probability of their winning an election against the achievement of personally or collectively desired policy goals. Wittman (1990) provides a thorough review of this formal modeling work up through the 1980s. He shows that assuming candidate and party policy preferences (and not just voter policy preferences) gives us much more realistic expectations about likely party divergence. In particular, if candidates have policy positions typical of voters in their own party, then we would expect some degree of party divergence [see reviews in Enelow & Hinich (1984), various essays in Enelow & Hinich (1990) and Hermsen (1991), and the recent work of Roemer (2001) and Adams et al. (2004, Ch. 11–12) for other work along similar lines].

J. Harrington (unpublished paper, 1993) offers an interesting model of what happens when we permit candidates to have both policy and vote-maximizing concerns. He models the behavior of a universe with both ideologues and office seekers in it. Depending on the ability of the voters to acquaint themselves with past positions of candidates, the process of competition can favor either office-seeking politicians or politicians who behave in a consistent ideological fashion. In most variations of the Harrington model, candidates of the “wrong” type are eventually driven from the political arena.

## Candidates/Parties Look Beyond the Next Election

The seminal work on longer-run strategic considerations is that of Budge (1994), who considers a range of options for parties that are seeking to position themselves for long-term success, especially after experiencing failure (see also Wagemans 2001). Perhaps the most important recent work along these lines dealing with the United States is Finegold & Swift (2001). When parties are looking past a single election, the repertoire of responses is more complex than looking for a winning centrist location. It can include the option of introducing new issues that can eventually cause a split in the present majority coalition (Riker 1982b).

Also, parties may be playing a game of entry deterrence. There may be incentives for tacit collusion between two parties to prevent entry of a third (centrist) party that will eclipse them both. Brams (1980) shows that, in a single dimension, for certain distributional assumptions about voters’ ideological preferences, entry deterrence may give rise to parties located at the first and third quartiles of the voter distribution; Palfrey (1984) has similar but somewhat more general results.

If candidates are playing a long-run game in which they expect to contest for higher office, and if constituencies differ in the location of their median voter and scrutiny will expose a candidate’s past record, then the optimal position for a politician need not be at the median voter location in the constituency he or she *presently* represents. UCLA Professor Richard Anderson, a former congressional staffer, has suggested that many members of the US House of Representatives position themselves in advance with an eye toward an eventual run for the senate (R. Anderson, personal communication, 1994). This idea has been supported by the work of Frances et al. (1994), who find that members of the House with career ambitions to become US senators begin to shift toward the position of their party’s senator 13 years before they run for Senate (see also Schmidt et al. 1996).

Only a few formal models of party competition take a longitudinal perspective. Page et al. (1992) use a genetic algorithm to model the behavior of adaptive parties, optimizing in a sequentially responsive fashion. They find what we would characterize as a “slow waltz” of convergence to centrist policies (see also Merrill & Grofman 1999b, Ch. 10). On the other hand, Alesina (1988) offers a model in which sequential competition with a discounted time horizon can lead parties to offer divergent platforms. Over time, if incumbents are reelected, a divergence between the incumbent position and that of the electorate can arise as the latter

shifts but the former does not. Also relevant is the work of Grofman (1985), which suggests how party divergence may shift with shifts in the location of the status quo. As noted above, Grofman assumes that voters locate not only the candidates and themselves but also the status quo, and then decide which candidate to prefer based on where that candidate can be expected to move the status quo (a discounted function of the platform position each candidate espouses). Because the status quo changes over time, in the Grofman model we can have changes in voter choices without any changes in voter preferences.

## Candidates/Parties Inaccurately Estimate the Policy Preferences of Voters

Various authors have looked at what happens when candidates are unsure of voters' policy locations, but when uncertainty is random, the effects on convergence will be minimal to nonexistent (see, e.g., Glazer et al. 1989). However, just as systematic biases may affect voters' estimations of parties' locations, systematic biases may well influence candidate/party perceptions of where their supporters are and/or of where the median voter might be located. In particular, we might expect a wish-fulfillment effect, in which candidates overestimate their congruence to the electorate. This effect will tend to support party divergence. A wish-fulfillment effect for a party losing votes should be particularly pronounced when there have been major changes in voter attitudes. This is exactly what P. Norris & J. Lovenduski (unpublished manuscript, 2001) find for a recent British election.

## Candidates Are Not Part of a Unified Party Team

Instead of being part of a unified party team, as the standard Downsian model assumes, candidates of a given party may adapt their platforms to local constituencies—constituencies with differing local medians. We have already looked at what may happen when candidates offer policies identical to those offered by their party's candidates in other constituencies. As a variable, the importance of multiple constituencies interacts with the variables of consistency of party positions across constituencies and the degree to which constituencies differ in the location of their median voter. If candidates of a given party are free to change their position to make it attractive to the median voter in the constituency in which they are competing (e.g., in the United States, Democrats in the South running as conservatives), then polarization between the parties may be mitigated. A. Wuffle (personal communication, 1990) calls this a "rubber band effect"—the candidates of each party, though for the most part tethered to the national position of their party, may have some freedom of movement, so that, within any given constituency, they would tend to resemble one another more than they resemble some candidates of their own party in other constituencies (see Ansolabehere et al. 2001, Grofman et al. 2000).

However, when constituencies differ in the location of their median voter, the candidates *elected from* each party might have different platforms even if the candidates *nominated by* each party presented nearly identical positions within

any given constituency. Because of association with national party images, the candidate associated with the more liberal party is likely to be advantaged in liberal constituencies, whereas the candidate of the more conservative party is advantaged in more conservative constituencies (Grofman et al. 2000; cf. Esaiasson 1999: Table 6.1, p. 120). Thus, *ceteris paribus*, in the United States, liberal constituencies are more likely to elect Democrats and conservative constituencies are more likely to elect Republicans. But then, as judged by its visible spokespersons, the Democratic Party will be a party on the left and the Republican Party a party on the right, reinforcing voter perceptions of ideological divergence and guaranteeing that the divergence will persist (Grofman et al. 2000).

In the United States, this pattern of ideological party polarization was slow to emerge because of the lingering complication of Civil War attitudes, which kept the conservative South solidly supporting the Democrats despite the gradual leftward shift of the national Democratic Party. But, once racial considerations and attitudes about government pushed conservative southerners in the same direction—after a Democratic president (Lyndon Johnson) successfully pressed for passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and a Republican president (Ronald Reagan) made the sunbelt his key to victory—we saw a substantial increase in party polarization (Grofman et al. 2001, Miller & Schofield 2003, Poole & Rosenthal 1997, Stonecash et al. 2003).

## SUMMARY

In general, there are both centripetal and centrifugal forces at work in electoral competition. In this essay, our focus has been on two-party competition under plurality voting. Having identified the ancillary assumptions of the Downsian model giving rise to two-party convergence, we have demonstrated that even limited changes in any of these assumptions can be sufficient to make the convergence result go away. In recognizing the complicating factors identified above, contra the classic comic-book version of Downs (but not contra Downs himself), we would expect that, under plurality, candidates will in general be much closer to the median voter in their own party than to the overall median voter, but will be shifted somewhat toward the views of potential swing voters. This is exactly what the U.S. evidence shows (Grofman et al. 1990, Poole & Rosenthal 1984, Shapiro et al. 1990).

Attempts have been made to modify the simple Downsian model that predicts convergence of policy positions in two-party plurality-based electoral competition to make it compatible with evidence that parties in the United States (and elsewhere) are not Tweedledum-Tweedledee. Green & Shapiro (1994) view these attempts as, in effect, analogous to the attempts to modify the misguided Ptolemaic notion of a circular orbit of the planets around the Earth by piling epicycles on epicycles so as to “prevent” the model from being rejected by the data. I disagree. Work by scholars who have built on Downsian ideas, pursuing what I have come to call the “neo-Downsian agenda,” allows us to build toward an institution-specific

and voter preference-distribution-specific theory of party competition that does have testable implications when judged in terms of comparative statics. That is, we can identify factors that will have a predictable effect in either fostering or hindering party convergence. By organizing those factors in terms of the assumptions used to generate the basic Downsian convergence result, this essay provides a convenient framework to summarize and synthesize several decades of research, both formal and empirical, on neo-Downsian spatial models of two-party competition (see also Adams et al. 2004, Ch. 4).

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## CONTENTS

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NOT YOUR PARENTS' POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION: INTRODUCTION FOR A NEW GENERATION, <i>Virginia Sapiro</i>	1
DOWN AND TWO-PARTY CONVERGENCE, <i>Bernard Grofman</i>	25
"BUSINESS" IS NOT AN INTEREST GROUP: ON THE STUDY OF COMPANIES IN AMERICAN NATIONAL POLITICS, <i>David M. Hart</i>	47
CITIZENSHIP AND EDUCATION, <i>Eamonn Callan</i>	71
LATINO POLITICS, <i>Rodolfo O. de la Garza</i>	91
GLOBAL MEDIA AND POLITICS: TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNICATION REGIMES AND CIVIC CULTURES, <i>W. Lance Bennett</i>	125
ACTORS, NORMS, AND IMPACT: RECENT INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION THEORY AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE AGENT-STRUCTURE DEBATE, <i>Kate O'Neill, Jörg Balsiger,</i> <i>and Stacy D. VanDeveer</i>	149
STATES AS LABORATORIES: A REPRISE, <i>Sarah M. Morehouse</i> <i>and Malcolm E. Jewell</i>	177
MEASURING THE EFFECTS OF TELEVISED POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE UNITED STATES, <i>Kenneth Goldstein and Travis N. Ridout</i>	205
OAKESHOTT AND POLITICAL SCIENCE, <i>Kenneth Minogue</i>	227
WHAT DOES POLITICAL ECONOMY TELL US ABOUT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT—AND VICE VERSA?, <i>Philip Keefer</i>	247
POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS, <i>G. Bingham Powell, Jr.</i>	273
A CRITICAL GUIDE TO BUSH V. GORE SCHOLARSHIP, <i>Richard L. Hasen</i>	297
PUBLIC DELIBERATION, DISCURSIVE PARTICIPATION, AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT: A REVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL LITERATURE, <i>Michael X. Delli Carpini, Fay Lomax Cook, and Lawrence R. Jacobs</i>	315
ADVOCACY AND SCHOLARSHIP IN THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL WAR CRIME TRIBUNALS AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE, <i>Leslie Vinjamuri and Jack Snyder</i>	345

MARTIN SHAPIRO AND THE MOVEMENT FROM “OLD” TO “NEW” INSTITUTIONALIST STUDIES IN PUBLIC LAW SCHOLARSHIP, <i>Howard Gillman</i>	363
THE CENTRALITY OF RACE IN AMERICAN POLITICS, <i>Vincent L. Hutchings and Nicholas A. Valentino</i>	383
MODELS OF VETOES AND VETO BARGAINING, <i>Charles Cameron and Nolan McCarty</i>	409
DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA: NEW DEBATES AND RESEARCH FRONTIERS, <i>Gerardo L. Munck</i>	437
DIRECT DEMOCRACY: NEW APPROACHES TO OLD QUESTIONS, <i>Arthur Lupia and John G. Matsusaka</i>	463
BAYESIAN ANALYSIS FOR POLITICAL RESEARCH, <i>Simon Jackman</i>	483
INDEXES	
Subject Index	507
Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 1–7	523
Cumulative Index of Chapter Titles, Volumes 1–7	525
ERRATA	
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