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# RETHINKING DOMINANT PARTY SYSTEMS \*

**Patrick Dunleavy**

*Abstract:* Empiricist definitions of ‘dominant party systems’ incorporating ‘longitudinal’ time requirements risk tautology and create unacceptable lags in recognizing dominance. We urgently need an analytic definition that can identify parties as dominant independently from their tenure of office. I suggest that a party can be recognized as dominant if three criteria are met simultaneously:

- The party is seen as exceptionally effective by voters, so that it is set apart from all other parties.
- It consequently has an extensive ‘core’ or protected area of the ideological space, within which no other party can compete effectively for voters’ support.
- At the basic minimum level of effectiveness that voters use to judge whether to participate or not, the lead party has a wider potential appeal to more voters than its rivals

This approach means that we can identify a party as dominant immediately it establishes a higher level of effectiveness. It also generates some key hypotheses that are well supported in the existing literature on dominant party systems and could be more precisely tested in future, specifically:

- Factionalism should be a more serious problem for dominant party leaders than in more competitive systems.
- In ‘uncrowded’ ideological space one-party dominance will be sustained by the strong logic of opposition parties adopting ‘clear water’ positional strategies.
- Only when *some* opposition parties adopt ‘convergent’ or ‘deeply convergent’ positioning strategies will support for dominant parties tend to be seriously eroded.
- Factional exits from the dominant party are the most likely route by which opposition parties with ‘deeply convergent’ strategies emerge.
- Greater crowding of the ideological space is a key stimulus to some opposition parties adopting convergent or deeply convergent strategies. It also helps overcome the positional advantages that dominant parties often have, making minimum connected winning coalitions easier for opposition parties.
- Hence the multiplication of parties is a key dynamic undermining dominant party systems.

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In political science an idea often emerges inductively and becomes widely adopted before ever an intellectually adequate specification of it has been provided. Such a concept is that of a 'dominant party system' (Arian and Barnes, 1974). 'Longitudinal' versions of the concept are tautological and re-descriptive – they say only that a party is dominant when it is continuously in government for a specified period. As a result the term is briefly cited in around half of the specialist dictionaries or encyclopaedias in political science but ignored in the remainder of the definitional volumes and almost never recognized as useful even in directly adjacent fields, such as the analysis of electoral systems. This paper sets out to re-conceptualize dominant party systems in a different, more analytic way, using a public choice-based approach. I first briefly survey current problems and then propose a new definition making no reference to tenure of office. The second section applies this approach to the existing literature on the dynamics of dominant party systems. I conclude with a set of hypotheses that should prove helpful in guiding future empirical research.

## **1. Towards an analytic definition**

Most authors define dominant parties and dominant party systems using a longitudinal approach and focusing on control of government or the legislature, although they vary in the vagueness or specificity of their definitions, and in the time needed for dominance to become established:

'Dominant parties are those which are uninterruptedly in government, either alone or as the senior partners of a coalition, for a long period of time (say three to five decades)' (Cox, 1997, p. 238).

*'The predominant party system.* This is a system where one party regularly wins enough parliamentary seats to control government on its own' (Ware, 1995, p. 159).

'The least restrictive measure stipulates a single election... but this so dramatically widens the universe of cases that it makes the concept virtually useless. One of the most restrictive measures, on the other hand, sets the bar as high as 50 years (Cox, 1997: 238). But this criterion reduces the universe to just Mexico. I argue that a useful longevity threshold should capture the notion that a dominant party system is a stable pattern of inter-party competition, but should not be so restrictive that it makes the category disappear. This [is thus a] "one generation" requirement....' (Green, 2007, p. 16)

A key virtue of such definitions is that they do not inquire into the origins of dominance, but other approaches marry longevity to outperforming rivals:

‘Sartori (1976: 192-201) defines a predominant party system as one in which the major party is constantly supported by a winning majority of voters... Sartori [...] allowed for the existence of a “predominant party system”, a system in which one particular party, such as, most notably, Congress in India or the Liberal Democrats in Japan, consistently (that is, over at least four legislatures) won a winning majority of parliamentary seats’ (Mair, 1998, pp. 53 and 203).

Longitudinal approaches all suffer from requiring a time lag before we can recognize dominance (e.g. the African National Congress in South Africa from the first democratic elections, even though it won 67 per cent support), and from often defining dominance at exactly the points where a long-standing incumbent is about to lose power (e.g the British Conservatives under John Major from 1992-7).

The dominant party system concept does not fit smoothly with other box-filling approaches based on categorizing party systems by the numbers or mixes of parties:

‘A predominant party system can by definition coexist with every possible category of party numbers [in Sartori’s work] (that is it can develop within a context of a two party system, a system of limited pluralism, and a system of extreme pluralism) and, at least theoretically, with every possible spread of the ideological distance’ (Mair, 1998, p. 203).

The widespread shift to analysing party systems in a dimensionalized way, using concepts such as the effective number of parties, also means that the literature involved often make no references to the dominant party concept (such as Lijphardt, 1999).

Other approaches have been vaguer and less operationally defined, but highlight the concept of a systematic advantage for one party, an influence that can switch on at once after a single election and is widely recognized by opponents and voters alike:

‘A party is dominant when it is identified with an epoch; when its doctrines, ideas, methods, its style so to speak, coincide with those of the epoch... A dominant party is that which public opinion believes to be dominant... Even the enemies of the dominant party, even citizens who refuse to give it their vote, acknowledge its superior status and its influence; they deplore it but they admit it’ (Duverger, 1954, pp. 308-9).

*‘Dominant party.* A party which enjoys a preponderant influence in a given party system. It is generally used with little specification of the causes or

extent of dominance... Dominant parties should not be identified with parties which are perennially in government' (Daalder, 1987, p. 180).

Perhaps the most all-embracing definition was offered by O'Leary (1994, p.4) who demands that multiple elements all be present:

'[W]e know what we mean by a dominant party in democratic conditions. First, it must be a party which is dominant in number: it must regularly win more seats in parliamentary or congressional elections than its opponents... Secondly, this party must enjoy a dominant bargaining position. It must be able to stay in government on a regular basis. If it must share power with smaller parties,... it is nevertheless the key agent in the political system, with privileged access to the key executive and legislative posts. Thirdly,... a dominant party must be chronologically pre-eminent. It must govern continuously for a long time, although analysts might differ over whether three or four general election victories, and whether a decade or a decade and a half are the crucial benchmarks of dominance. Finally a dominant party must be ideologically dominant: it must be capable of using government to shape public policy so that the nature of the state and the society over which it presides is fundamentally changed'.

Defenders of the empiricist approach sometimes see benefit in Duverger's approach but also argue against more analytic approaches:

'Although it could be argued that a system that was dominant at any time  $t$  was in fact dominant prior to  $t$ , to pursue this no-threshold argument, we would have to measure dominance by the mechanisms that sustain it. Treating potential explanatory variables as descriptive measures would succeed only in constructing a tautology' (Greene, 2007, p.17).

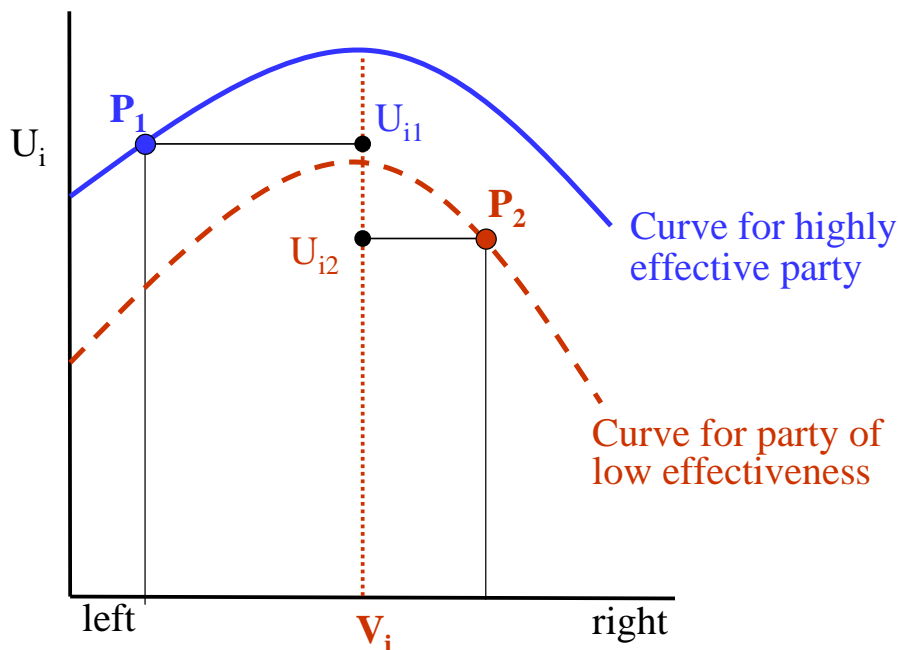
Yet it is a very different thing to formulate some analytic criteria for recognizing a dominant party system and to seek to measure and dimensionalize 'dominance' itself. The current chapter attempts the former but not the latter. I suggest that a party can be recognized as dominant if three criteria are met simultaneously:

- The party is seen as especially effective by voters, so that it is set apart from all other parties.
- It consequently has an extensive 'core' or protected area of the ideological space, within which no other party can compete effectively for voters' support.
- At the basic minimum level of effectiveness (that voters use to judge whether to participate or not), the lead party has a wider potential appeal to more voters than its rivals

I specify this alternative approach following standard proximity analysis (Hinich and Minger, 1994), but in a key variant developed by Won Taek Kang (2004, 1997)

that has already yielded distinctive insights into protest voting and the dynamics of support for third and smaller parties under plurality rule. Although I make some small modifications in approach and representation here, the fundamental insight is Kang's - namely that the efficacy (or quality) of a party has an important conditioning effect on its appeal, quite separate from and additional to its adoption of a manifesto or programme position in policy or ideological space. Figure 1 shows the utility profile for an individual voter  $i$  in a two-party system where both rivals compete for voters' support in a one-dimensional, left-right ideological space shown on the horizontal axis. As in standard proximity voting analysis, all other things being equal, the closer a party is to  $i$ 's personal optimum point the greater its utility, and the further away the more  $i$ 's utility level from the party falls away, so both parties utility profiles have the same shape. Every voter views the parties competing in the same way, rating the party closest to them over opponents which are further away.

**Figure 1: The utility profiles of an individual voter at  $V_i$  for two parties with differentiated effectiveness**




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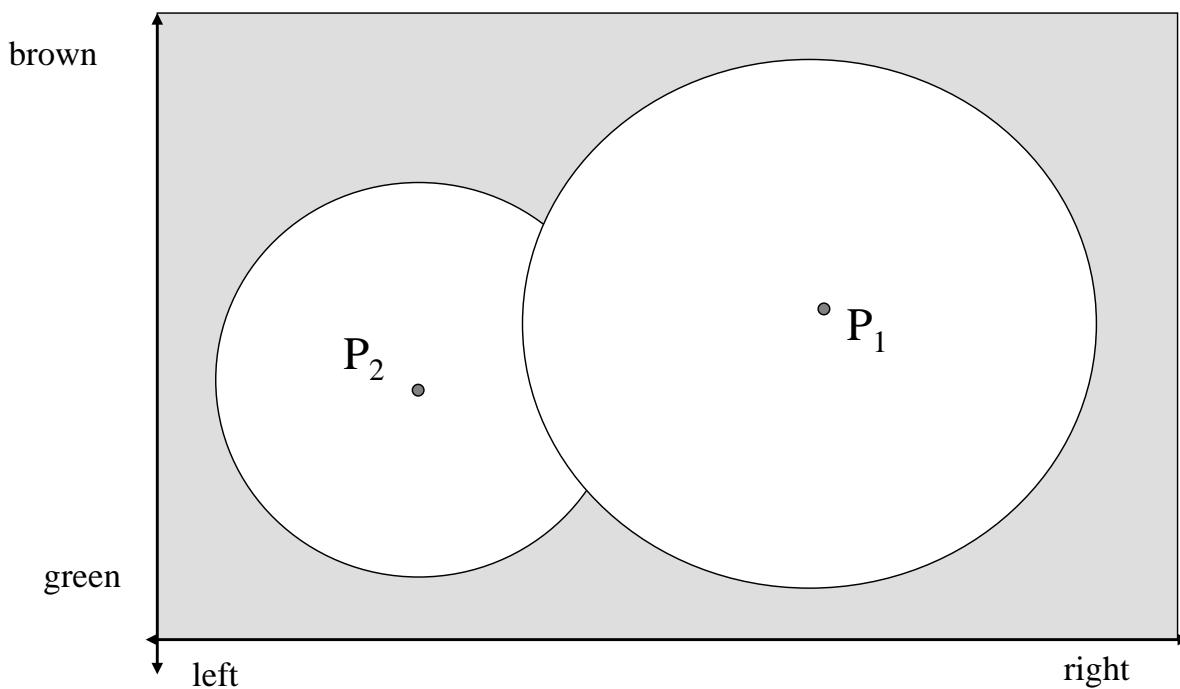
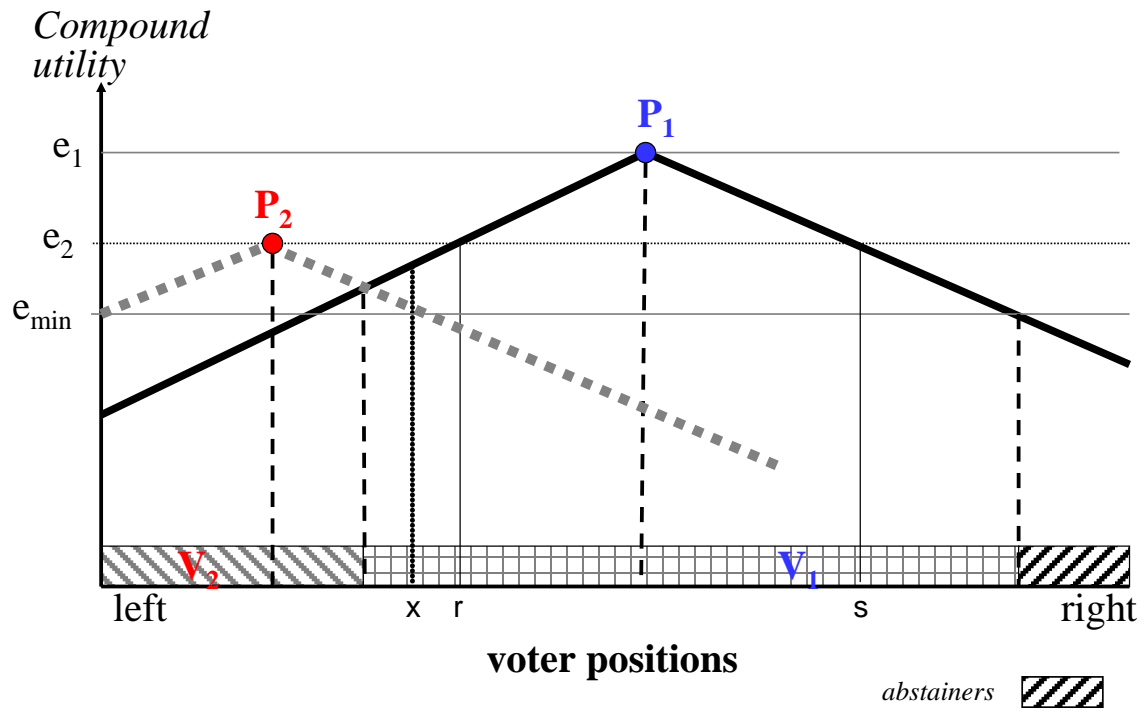
*Notes:*  $U_i$  utility of voter  $i$ ;  $V_i$  personal ideological optimum position of voter  $i$ ;  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  positions of first and second largest parties respectively.

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However, in Figure 1 voter  $i$  does not see the parties as equivalent. She differentiates between them in terms of their efficacy, so as to cast her vote for  $P_1$  (a more ideologically distant but more effective party) rather than  $P_2$  (a more proximate but less effective choice) – because doing so maximizes her compound utility (i.e.  $U_1 > U_2$ ). Some detailed reasons are considered below for why the same policy position advocated by a highly effective party offers  $i$  more utility than if proposed by a less effective. A useful analogy at this stage is with consumers on a beach considering where to go for an ice cream when there are two stalls offering different high and low quality brands. Consumers may find that their total utility is maximized by patronizing an ice cream stall that is spatially further away than its rival (so more of a drag to walk to), but which offers an improved taste or simply a brand image which they prefer. Quality in political life is more difficult to capture, but parties' efficacy is a key element of it.

Now to get from the individual level to an aggregate picture we collate the individual ratings (like  $i_1$  and  $i_2$ ) for all voters with personal optima at each given point on the left-right continuum (or wider dimensional political space) and average them to get a mapping as shown in Figure 2a, where the horizontal axis shows left-right positions and the vertical axis the average compound utility (a function of both proximity and party efficacy) for voters in that ideological location. I assume that all parties' positions are known and unambiguously perceived. The parties' effectiveness peaks always occur amongst voters at their chosen policy positions on the left-right continuum, but in a dominant party system the leading party  $P_1$  is more effective than any rival. Figure 2 shows a simple system with the largest party located at  $P_1$  at an  $e_1$  level of efficacy and its rival located at  $P_2$  at the lower level  $e_2$ . Voters have a minimum level of effectiveness below which they will not vote for any party, shown here as  $e_{\min}$ . This efficacy advantage defines a 'core' support range for  $P_1$  that no rival can hope to capture, shown as the range from points  $r$  to  $s$  on the horizontal axis. In any given voter position, such as point  $x$ , voters compare their compound utility from voting for the available viable parties and chose the best one in terms of both closeness and party efficacy (in this case  $P_1$ ). In a pure case system where voters are evenly distributed along the ideological spectrum (an assumption relaxed below) the shaded bars for  $V_1$  and  $V_2$  denote the relative sizes of parties' support.

**Figure 2: A simple dominant party system with only two parties, shown in one-dimensional and two-dimensional views**




 = zone where no party exceeds minimal effectiveness level , i.e non-voters

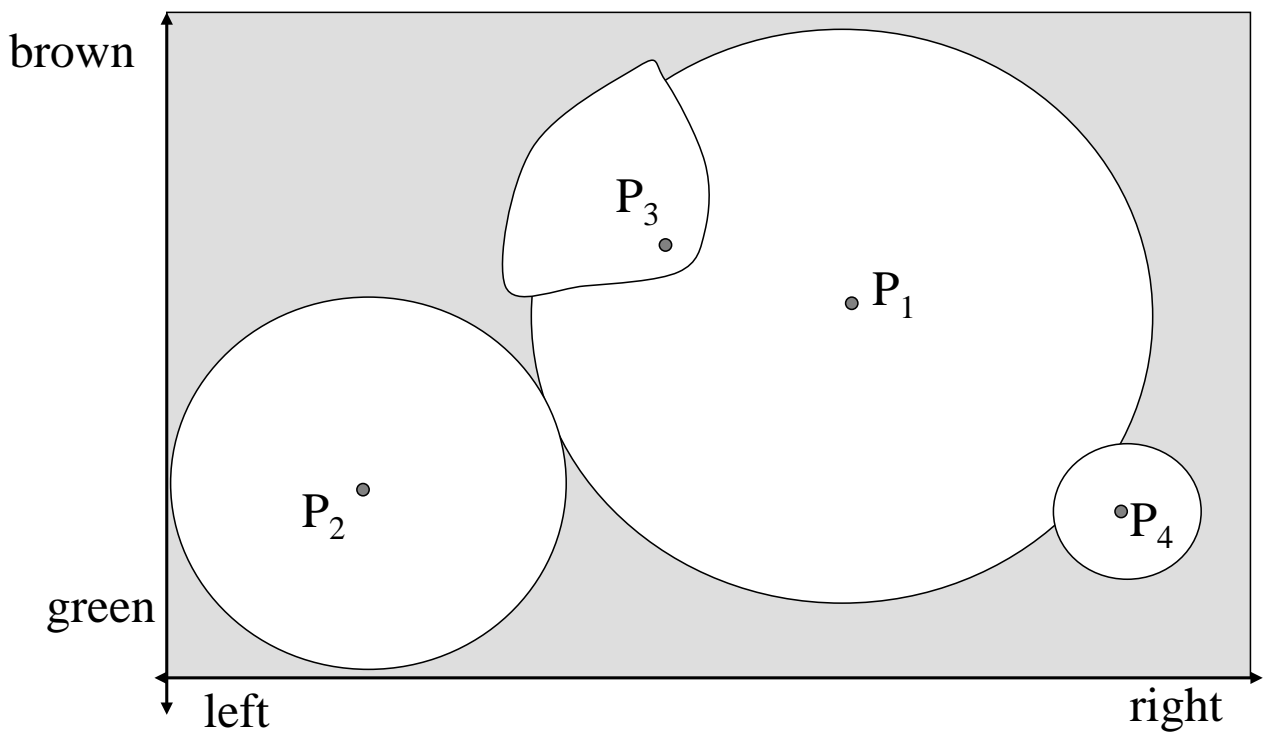
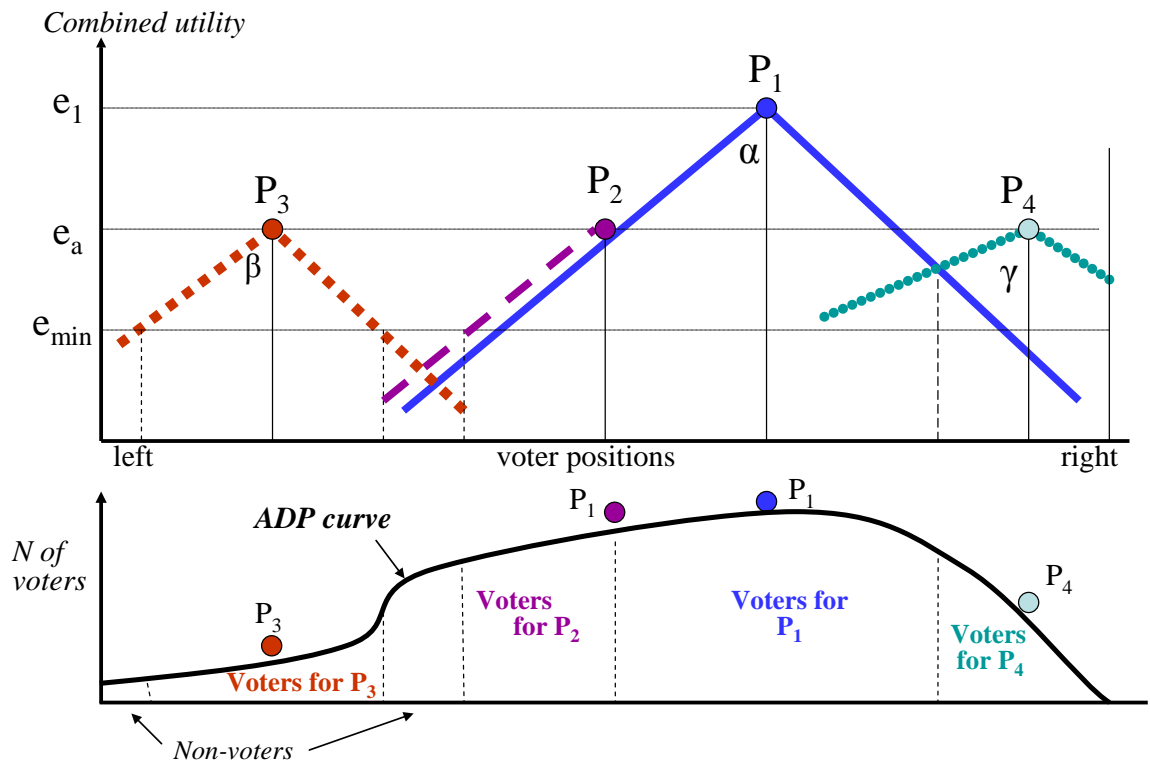


Figure 2b shows the same system in a two-dimensional ‘floorplate’ space, where the grey-shaded space denotes voters who abstain and the  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  circles show those supporting the two parties. The overall square shape may be thought of as defined by ‘feasibility frontiers’ (as suggested in directional models of voting), beyond which a party locating will get no votes at all. (Of course, the shape of this overall boundary could easily be varied).

The ‘umbrella’ slopes in Figure 2a shows the combined impact of all voters’ average perception of the starting effectiveness of the party (at its preferred optimum position) and their assessment of the distance between the party’s own policy position and their individual optimum point. The Figure can be thought of as composed of a series of side-by-side snapshots of the average comparative ratings of all the parties competing in a polity by all the voters positioned at each ideological point on the left-right dimension. In the pure case, I take it that the parties’ average utility curves for multiple segments of voters across the ideological spectrum will generally look like continuous lines. (In practice, these lines might be ‘thicker’ or there may be minor or major jumps or variations in how voters at different points rate parties’ utilities for them, for instance, at class or ethnic group boundaries. In these cases, the spliced-together aggregate or average pictures of how voters at successive points along the ideological spectrum rate the parties may well show discontinuities or thresholds). Thus each point in the party slopes lines in Figure 2

Figure 3a shows a more complex case than in Figure 2, here with three opposition parties all at the same lower level of effectiveness  $e_a$  (a for alternatives). (This assumption is just for analytic convenience and it could easily be relaxed to allow instead for a range of effectiveness levels for opposition parties). Because of its higher efficacy the dominant party’s ‘slopes’ will span across more of the ideological spectrum at the  $e_{\min}$  level of effectiveness than the slopes of any other party. The bottom part of Figure 3a shows varying numbers of voters for each position along the ideological spectrum as an aggregate distribution of preferences (ADP) curve (Dunleavy, 1991, Ch. 5). Here again it should be clear that  $P_1$  will control the largest bloc of support in the electorate.

**Figure 3: A more complex dominant party system with four viable parties**




 = zone where no party exceeds minimal effectiveness level, i.e. non-voters

Figure 3b shows the same situation in a two-dimensional policy/ideology space. Again the grey-shaded areas indicate voters who abstain because no party is both close enough to them and efficacious enough to reach the  $e_{\min}$  level of combined utility to be worth supporting.

Figures 2 and 3 also highlights some characteristic problems faced by opposition parties in competing with a dominant rival (see especially, Johnson, 2000). Essentially each opposition rival has to choose between two choices (also summarized in Table 1):

- maximizing their individual support as a party, best pursued by putting ‘clear blue water’ between it and  $P_1$ , as with  $P_2$  in Figure 3, but at the same time leaving  $P_1$ ’s support undiminished in any way; or
- opting for a convergent strategy of adopting ideological positions closer to  $P_1$ , an approach that automatically restricts any rival’s support base, yet does eat into  $P_1$ ’s dominance. Getting closer to the policy position of the higher efficacy dominant party is also dangerous for any rival, because if  $P_1$  shifts its policy stance towards them then all or part of their support may quickly desert the opposition party.

**Table 1: Three strategies open to lower efficacy opposition rivals in competing with a dominant party**

<i>Strategy (and party example in Figure 3)</i>	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
<i>Clear-water (<math>P_2</math>)</i>	Maximizes the size of the opposition party’s support, given its lower efficacy level	Does not reduce $P_1$ ’s support at all
<i>Convergent (<math>P_4</math>)</i>	Reduces $P_1$ ’s support somewhat	$P_1$ may shift its policy position towards the convergent rival, and easily erode part of its support
<i>Deeply convergent (<math>P_3</math>)</i>	Directly cuts into $P_1$ ’s support	The opposition party may have only half as much support as it could get by following a clearwater strategy (in a flat ADP distribution). $P_1$ may shift its policy position towards the deeply convergent rival, potentially wiping it out entirely

In practice, deep convergence is so risky that it may be practiced principally by parties that form through a faction exiting from the dominant party itself, such as  $P_3$  in Figure 3. The leaders of a factional exit are typically prominent within a wing of the dominant party. By exiting they can minimally differentiate themselves from their former party, and yet preserve a high degree of ideological consistency with their previous positions. Although they will automatically slip down to a lower level of efficacy in a new, small party, the faction leaders may hope to retain support from their existing voter segment. Similarly, if a faction exit subsequently prompts  $P_1$  to move its position so as to reabsorb voters who desert, it may be feasible for the faction leaders to rejoin  $P_1$  on advantageous terms, claiming that the main party has now returned to an acceptable ideological stance. In highly factionalized political systems (like Japan under the Liberal Democrats or Italy in the period of Christian Democrat hegemony) this is thus something of an each-way bet for leaders of a break-away faction party (Boucek, 2001; Bouissou, 2001; Browne and Kim, 2003, 2001). By contrast, the potential for the same mobility by  $P_1$  could be a catastrophic threat for the leaders of a wholly separate party, especially a start-up with low initial efficacy.

So the essential hallmark of a dominant party system is that it has (at least) a two tier efficacy ranking (visible to all voters), with only the largest party in the top tier. This effectiveness advantage ( $e_1 - e_a$ ) must persist over a substantial period of time (but notice that this does not mean that  $P_1$  should necessarily win elections, as I argue below). This long-run advantage must also be independently observable and it cannot be very closely related to  $P_1$ 's spatial choice of position (whether on the left/right ideological spectrum shown here or within a two- or multi-dimensional space). Instead the effectiveness advantage should derive from relatively exogenous factors and hence be relatively invariant in respect of all policy shifts in party competition.

What kinds of long-run advantagement meeting these criteria might sustain one-party dominance in liberal democracies? The current empirical literature, including papers in this volume, indicate seven main factors:

(i) *Greater access to political finance* can be expected to increase a party's effectiveness for many reasons. Empirical studies have normally shown that higher levels of campaign spending have positive results at national and sub-national levels. And there are strong theoretical reasons to expect better-funded parties to outperform

less well funded rivals. For instance, Besley and Coate (1997) have argued that in any political system where some people who cast votes are none the less poorly informed, they will choose between parties in a random way if there is zero campaign advertizing. But with positive campaign spending they will be pulled towards the highest spending party by differential exposure to its messages. Dominant parties often have links to the wealthiest social groups or big businesses disposing of the largest political donations, as with the Liberal Democrats in Japan (Fukui, 2007).

(ii) *Links to key social groups or interest groups* that are pre-existing or independently-sustained in civil society will confer important organizational advantages on a dominant party compared with other parties that must construct their social capital *de novo* (Marwell and Oliver, 1983). Dominant parties will often have links

- to a major religious group (such as the link between the Christian Democrats and the Catholic church in post-war Italy, or the still existent links from the Christain Social Party to the Catholic church in Bavaria)); or
- to a large or hegemonic social movement (such as the labour movement in Sweden, which unionized 85 per cent of working people in the 1950s and '60s; or the labour movement in Israel's early post-1948 history),

(iii) *Media preponderance* from a partisan press and from commercial or unregulated broadcast media is likely to be associated with both the previous factors. For instance, during most of their 1979-97 period of dominance the British Conservatives benefited from a nearly three to one advantage in terms of the readership of newspapers supporting them over opposition parties (although not in the final election) (see Margetts and Smyth, 1994).

(iv) *Links to a preponderant ethnic or linguistic group*. In polities divided on ethnic or linguistic group lines, a party which first or best mobilizes the support of the preponderant group in conflicts with the second largest group will often derive substantial advantages, as with the African National Congress links with the majority (non-Zulu) black ethnic groups in South Africa . More complex permutations are also feasible, as with the Liberals' control of federal (but not provincial) elections in French-speaking Quebec in 19xx-xx, which gave them a privileged basis in terms of Commons seats to compete against rival parties confined only to English-speaking voters in other provinces.

(v) *Historical momentum* can be gained by being the party responsible for founding the state or nation, or from introducing liberal democracy, or from establishing the first comprehensive welfare state. Parties which put in place some or all of the institutional apparatus of a democratic state may gain a long-run reputational resource, especially valuable in times of crisis or stress for these institutions. This resource will subsequently tend to decay over time as the polity moves onwards away from the founding event. Dominant parties with this kind of ‘foundational’ element in their effectiveness advantage have included the ANC in South Africa (Gilliomee, 1998; Gilliomee and Simkins, 1999) and Congress in India (both coming from long-lived and successful national independence movements), Labour in Israel (which founded both the state and its welfare system), or the Social Democrats in Sweden (who founded and developed an integrated welfare state). A key feature of historical momentum is that it is normally a steadily depleting resource which decays the further away in time the polity moves from its ‘formative’ period. However, more complex patterns are feasible, as with the Gaullist coalition’s predominance from 1958 to 1981, founded both on its leader’s incubated reputation (from wartime resistance to Nazi occupation and a brief tenure as leader of a post-war national coalition) and on de Gaulle’s subsequent re-founding of the Fifth Republic in the crisis of 1958, withdrawal from Algeria and introduction of the directly elected Presidency.

(vi) *An entrenched position within a non-proportional voting system* is often a key Plurality rule, block voting, SNTV and parallel systems (including a large proportion of local seats decided by plurality-voting) all characteristically display a strong ‘leader’s bias’ effect. In dominant party systems this effect normally operates to the exclusive advantage of the largest party ( $P_1$ ). The Liberal Democrats in Japan, Congress in India, and both the Liberals in Canada and the Conservatives in the UK in their dominant party periods, each benefited greatly from electoral system biases.

(vii) *Coalitional power advantages*. Dominant parties in multi-party systems often have greatly enhanced Banzhaf power index scores, because of the fragmentation of other parties’ vote bases. In addition  $P_1$  may be spatially advantaged. If its policy position is sufficiently close so that its core support straddles the median voter’s position at  $e_a$  then the dominant party will tend to monopolize the median legislator’s position (unless there is some electoral system bias against it, which seems highly unlikely). Even if  $P_1$  slips below majority support, this position often

makes it infeasible for any opposition grouping to form a majority coalition without it, as with the Christian Democrats in Italy and the Congress in India in their heyday.

Of course, most of these sources of effectiveness advantages can also be found in more competitive, non-dominant party systems – in which context they work to separate out two (or sometimes even three or four) ‘major’ parties from their ‘minor party’ rivals (Kang, 1995, 2004). However, a dominant party system is set apart from these more general cases by two features. First, these advantages are often cumulative for the dominant party, giving  $P_1$  extended, multi-aspect protection. Second, either  $P_1$  is completely alone in benefiting from substantial effectiveness advantages; or in the rare case where there is a second-rank party with some similar endowments (as with the Communist Party in post-war Italy), there are factors that permanently inhibit its effectiveness. For instance, as in Italy, the second-ranked party  $P_2$  may be relatively extreme on the ideological spectrum – here the dominant party’s advantages can be strengthened by an asymmetric ‘polarizing’ of intermediate opinion between  $P_1$  and  $P_2$ , which aids  $P_1$  especially in possible succession ‘crises’. Control of agenda-setting institutions and powers will also help protect  $P_1$ , so long as it remains the incumbent government.

## **2. The dynamics of dominant party systems**

A key challenge for a more analytic approach to party dominance is to explain change – to shed light not just on how dominance is established or maintained, but also on how it is eroded or ceases to operate (Nyblade, 2004). The approach set out here suggests eight main hypotheses that I run through in turn.

*1. Factionalism should be a more serious problem for dominant party leaders than in more competitive systems.* Because of its effectiveness advantage  $P_1$  will have substantial group of voters within its core ideological range who will always vote for it – wherever it locates. By contrast, its lower efficacy rivals have no protected core support. Hence  $P_1$  may be less concerned about choosing a precise policy position in ideological space than even major parties in close competition conditions. In turn, the costs of factional conflicts for dominant parties will also be lower than in competitive party systems. Hence factional conflicts seem to emerge more starkly (and perhaps quickly) within dominant parties than those more subject to competition from rivals of equivalent effectiveness. Ideologically motivated groups jockeying for position within

$P_1$  will know that the party can often or usually choose its policy position to reflect precisely the balance of internal factional forces, without risking major electoral consequences in doing so: hence there is everything to fight for (Boucek, 2001, especially Ch.2).

2. *If the ideological space is 'uncrowded' by viable parties, then one-party dominance will be sustained by the strong logic of opposition parties adopting 'clear water' positional strategies.* Look back to Figure 2 and it should be apparent that the second party's optimal strategy is to not seek to encroach on  $P_1$ 's support base at all, but instead to just maximize its own vote.

3. *Only when some opposition parties adopt 'convergent' or 'deeply convergent' positioning strategies will support for dominant parties tend to be seriously eroded. Greater crowding of the ideological space is a key stimulus to some opposition parties adopting convergent or deeply convergent strategies.* For instance, if conditions shift to a more crowded space because the number of parties increases (as in Figure 3) then it progressively becomes rational for some of the newer formed parties to begin to choose convergent strategies. I have argued that factional exits from the dominant party are the most likely route by which opposition parties with 'deeply convergent' strategies will emerge, and in supportive electoral systems factional exits from the dominant party may be an important motor of increasing numbers of parties themselves, notably in Italy (in the Christian Democrat period) and in Japan. And the multiplication of parties is one key dynamic undermining dominant party systems.

In non-proportional voting systems (such as plurality rule or SNTV) faction leaders who exit a dominant party may win votes but not gain seats in the legislature. Hence they will risk much-reduced personal leverage. Significant factional exits in such systems are only likely to occur when there is a crowded party system in which  $P_1$ 's position is already being threatened from both left and right (or from all directions in a two-dimensional policy space). In these relatively unusual circumstances,  $P_1$ 's support may be reduced to its core levels and the usual 'leader's bias' towards  $P_1$  in a non-PR system may be reduced. Here the leaders of factional exiters may both win significant seats in the legislature and have a reasonable chance of joining a coalition of all or most opposition parties in forming a viable alternative



government. The situation in Japan in the early and mid 1990s seems to approximate these conditions.

However, the extent of crowding in the party system will depend on several factors as well as the number of parties. Having restrictive feasibility boundaries within the political system will be disadvantageous for the dominant party, tending to encourage deep convergence. The age of the party system will also be an important influence. Newly established states or liberal democracies are likely to have 'emptier' party systems above the  $e_{\min}$  line than those where institutional development and consolidation has proceeded further. New party systems with proportional elections may have multiple very low efficacy parties, but these are hardly much threat to a dominant party - indeed they will tend to greatly buttress  $P_1$ 's Banzhaf power score if its vote or seats share should ever fall below single party majority control. Some exogenous shocks may work to restrict the feasible competition space, as when a previously important ideological position or part of the policy spectrum ceases to be viable. The collapse of Communism as an ideological threat in many liberal democracies following the 1989 demise of the Soviet Union and its 'empire' of satellite states was a key instance of this effect.

Finally the level of citizens' scepticism about party promises and their potential to make changes will be an important influence. The dominant party will be better situated where  $e_{\min}$  is relatively high in relation to  $e_a$ , that is where citizens demand relatively high levels of efficacy before actively supporting any rival party. A low differential ( $e_a - e_{\min}$ ) will mean that the number of viable opposition parties is thinned out. There are also more spaces where existing opposition parties can position to attract support from previous non-voters by following clear-water strategies, rather than adopting deeply convergent tactics more directed against and threatening to  $P_1$ .

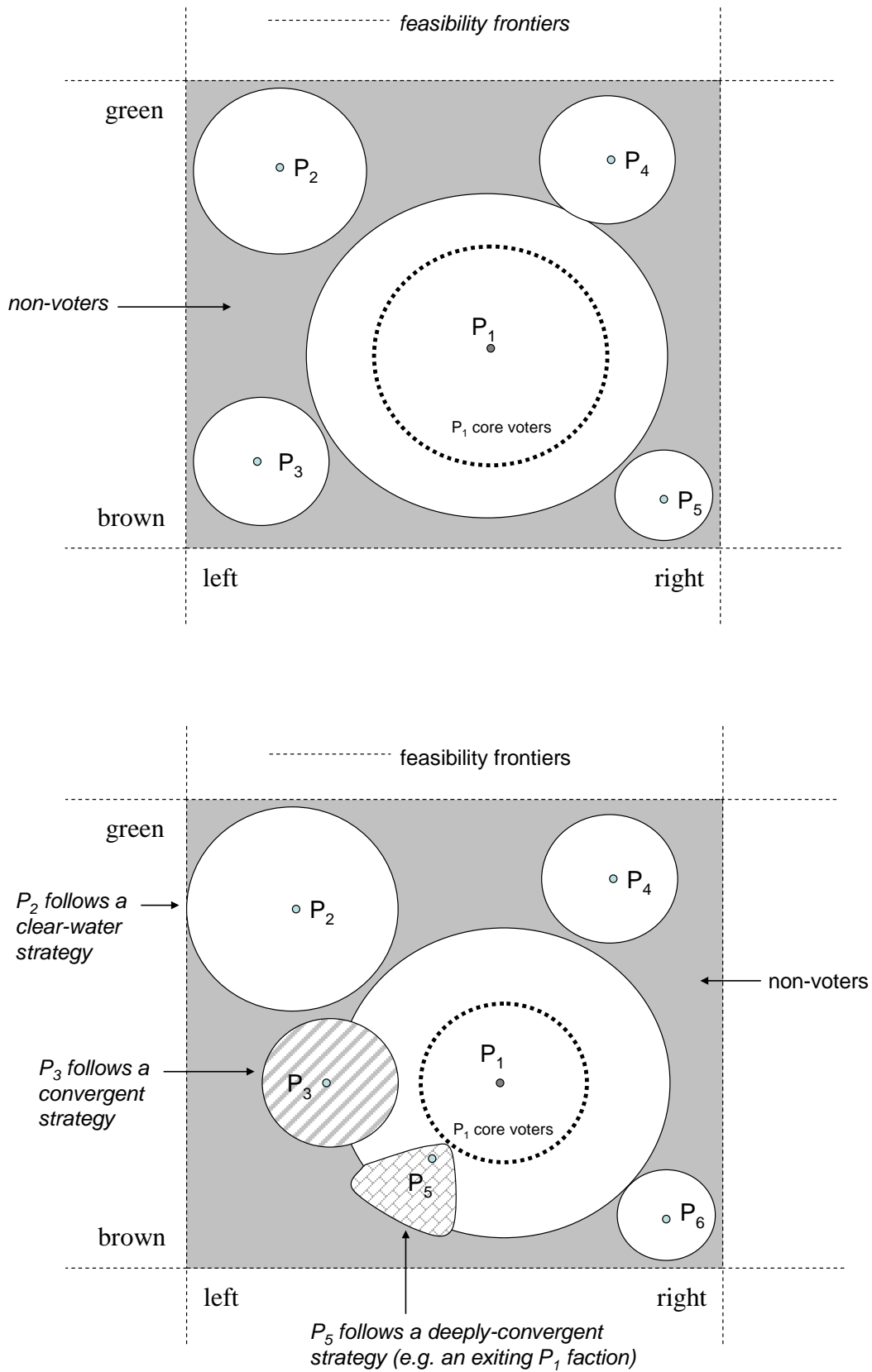
*4. Yet still the multiplication of parties is likely to be one key dynamic undermining dominant party systems. It may also facilitate the formation of connected opposition coalitions.* A key reason for this is that  $P_1$ 's rivals often confront a collective action problem in concerting opposition to the dominant party. In an uncrowded party system they can best maximize their individual vote totals by pursuing 'clear water' strategies. But if none of them converges on  $P_1$  the dominant party will maximize both its vote total and its vote share, thereby squeezing down the vote shares of each of the opposition parties. The precise effect here depends upon the scale of  $P_1$ 's initial

effectiveness advantage and the  $\alpha$  angle of the slopes of the parties, that is the elasticity of their appeal with distance from each party's policy position.

Even in more crowded party systems, convergent strategies remain riskier for new parties. We consider a purely hypothetical situation here, shown in Figure 4a. Here four opponents pursue clearwater strategies in ways that present no threat to the dominant party and that also maximize their ideological difficulties in forming any viable alternate coalition to  $P_1$ . As a result the opposition's collective action problem is not solved – they remain lower efficacy, all following precautionary and non-convergent strategies. In Figure 4b there are three significant changes. First, the dominant party's efficacy advantage has decayed relative to all its opponents – shown by the reduced size of dashed core support inner circle, and the less reduced overall size of the  $P_1$  overall support area. Second, a new sixth party has formed as a faction exit from  $P_1$  and pursues a deeply convergent strategy - this is now numbered  $P_5$  because it is the fifth largest party (again assuming a flat underlying ADP surface). Third,  $P_3$  has moved from a clearwater to a partial convergence strategy and shifted position so as erode the dominant party's support further, and incidentally to bridge between  $P_2$  and  $P_5$  in a way that would make a connected winning coalition feasible. Clearly such an opposition regrouping would represent more of a threat to  $P_1$  than the previous situation.

The key factors in transitions like this are likely to be the ease of establishing new parties (closely correlated with the kind of electoral system in use in the polity) and whether new entries are more easily made towards the edges of the feasible space or closer to the dominant party. In a one-dimensional ideology space if new entries tend to be ideologically 'extreme' a relatively lengthy process of competitive adjustment may have to occur before they pressure more centrist opposition rivals to adopt deeply convergent strategies damaging  $P_1$ . In a two-dimensional (or larger dimensioned) policy space (such as Figure 4) there may often be more scope for new parties to form in relatively centrist or less spatially constrained positions around new dimensions of political conflict.

**Figure 4: How a relatively crowded competition space may change to undermine  $P_1$ 's dominance**



5. *Dominant parties will make use of preference-shaping strategies than governing parties in competitive systems, tending to create over time a greater clustering of voters adjacent to the P<sub>1</sub> policy position.* So far the analysis has been premised on the assumption that the aggregate distribution of preferences across the electorate is basically flat. Yet this is unlikely to be the case, because a dominant party above all has strong incentives to adopt *preference-shaping strategies* of bringing voters towards the party's fixed position. It seems most likely that in any dominant party system there will be one ADP peak in the broad region where P<sub>1</sub> is located, for a series of effect and cause reasons. (There may also be other lesser peaks at other locations). First, a rational dominant party will initially position itself close to a vote maximizing peak in the ADP curve, especially where it seeks strong support from important interest groups or civil society organizations.

Second, if it becomes the incumbent government a dominant party also disposes of strong preference-shaping mechanisms. These capabilities include:

- being able to alter the social locations of voters via public policies;
- some potential to filter policy implementation in partisan-influenced ways (subject to a variably restrictive rule of law constraint);
- an option to manipulate social relativities to favour supportive social locations and disfavour opposition locations; and often
- control over some key institutional processes, such as the voting system, constituency boundaries and agenda-shaping powers within the legislature (see Dunleavy, 1991, Ch.5).

Any rational dominant party should consequently seek to use state power to reshape the ADP curve in a way which enhances a peak close to its own policy position and thins out the number of voters with personal optima in other parts of the ideological spectrum (or two-dimensional policy space). The mechanisms involved may often require quite long periods to operate, but the leaders of a dominant party with a strong effectiveness advantage are likely to have the requisite low over-time discount rates to sustain 'investments' in preference-shaping. Equally, the lower efficacy of opposition parties, and their extra difficulties in concerting opposition, mean that P<sub>1</sub>'s leaders and factions will alike have less reason to fear that financially costly or long-term preference-shaping strategies will be undermined by other parties' changes of competitive position or their limited ability to deploy countervailing party-based preference shaping approaches. Hence dominant parties will invest more resources in

preference-shaping strategies than parties in competitive systems (Dunleavy, 1991, Ch.5). Over time, and holding all other effects equal, it seems reasonable to expect an increasing concentration of voters in regions of the ADP proximate to  $P_1$ 's position.

*6. Yet preference-shaping by the dominant party also creates two counter-vailing effects, for greater factionalism and clientelism, and for the opposition parties to overcome their collective action problems in adopting convergent strategies.* The claim here is that the effect above also contains the seeds of two long-run problems for dominant party leaderships. First, greater use of preference-shaping approaches characteristically strengthens factionalism inside  $P_1$ . It may also breed an instrumentalism which becomes easily associated with unethical clientelism and outright corruption and thus a declining moral legitimacy for  $P_1$ . These temptations are greatest in state-building, post-transition contexts where an unusual scope of issues can be decided by central politicians, and where opposition or even independent media scrutiny can be weak, such as South Africa or Slovakia (O'Dwyer, 2006; Brooks, 2004).

Second, a greater clustering of voters around the broad  $P_1$  position automatically tends to overcome the opposition's collective action problem. The more that the ADP bulges close to  $P_1$ 's policy position the greater the vote increments open to deeply convergent opponents, and the less it matters if a larger range on the ideological spectrum would be open with a clear-water strategy. The size of the available vote blocs alone governs how parties choose strategies. With a single peaked and strongly clustered ADP curve a deeply convergent opponent like  $P_5$  in Figure 3 may attract more support by being the most effective party across a narrow part of the spectrum closer to  $P_1$  than a clear-water opposition party commanding a wider ideological range further out, such as  $P_2$ .

In an 'uncrowded' party system there would need to be a very sharp bulge in the ADP curves around  $P_1$ 's position for this effect to fully offset the larger ideological range achievable with a clear-water strategy. But in a more crowded system, with more parties competing with each other for clear-water positions within the feasibility boundaries, then a more gradual bulging in the ADP curve can still lead  $P_1$ 's opponents to consider deeply convergent strategies. If the total seats for the opposition can come close to rivalling  $P_1$ 's legislative bloc then deep convergence must be additionally attractive for at least some of  $P_1$ 's opponents. It directly reduces

$P_1$ 's votes and seats shares, while a viable chance of victory for the opposition bloc and the formation of a new government could dramatically reduce all the opposition parties' efficacy differential from  $P_1$ . This effect may be especially salient in non-proportional vote systems in perhaps causing a leader's bias distortion to switch away from  $P_1$ , as the erstwhile dominant party falls below a critical threshold level of support.

*7. As a result of all these effects the dominant party need no longer enjoy a constant effectiveness advantage over all its rivals.* Many kinds of social changes may erode the extent of an initial effectiveness advantage. For instance, most historical or 'foundational' effects will wear thinner over time through conventional 'aging' effects, as key events establishing party reputations recede downstream and more recent 'normal politics' effects loom larger in voters' minds. Where  $P_1$ 's past reputation is an important bulwark of its position, it will need to be sustained or renewed by reputation-consistent behaviours in office. Major departures from the party's historic record or political system crises (such as Indira Gandhi's imposition of a 'state of emergency' in India in the mid 1970s) may powerfully corrode an established advantage. Social groups to which the dominant party is financially or organizationally linked may also decline in numbers and influence. But the conventional pluralist optimism about 'countervailing powers' suggests that in liberal societies strong social and market forces may develop to counter-act apparently hegemonic interests. On the other hand, there will be factors operating against these corrosive trends implying a time-limit on party dominance, especially  $P_1$ 's efforts to use institutional power to maintain and enhance its effectiveness advantage.

A particular area to consider here is to vary another assumption made so far, namely that all parties' ideology/effectiveness slopes decline by a common angle  $\alpha$ . At first sight, it may seem logical that a dominant party, whose ideology/effectiveness slopes start from a higher peak, will also have 'umbrella' slopes that decline less steeply than those of opposition parties, especially where  $P_1$  benefits from strong 'foundational' effects or its support is linked to unchangeable or ascriptive characteristics (Like ethnicity, or to a lesser degree, religion). But over time the continued imbalance of party competition towards  $P_1$ , in most (but not all) cases accompanied by the dominant party's continuous presence in government, will itself

tend to become a major issue in electoral competition. The longer  $P_1$ 's effectiveness advantage lasts, and the greater and more obvious it becomes, the more voters may be turned off by it. The legitimacy of a single party monopolizing power for a long period will always be impaired in a liberal democracy, especially where a governmental system seems unable to offer any viable route for leadership succession or party alternation in power.

Leaders and factions inside  $P_1$  can make these substantial problems worse by their behaviour in office, especially in deploying state power for partisan purposes, overtly seeking to reshape the distribution of preferences for partisan advantage, re-ordering institutional arrangements in partisan ways, and facilitating or ineffectively combating the development of politically-linked malversation and corruption. In post-war Japan, and more spectacularly in India and in Italy from the 1970s onwards, all these developments contributed to the dominant party's electoral appeal becoming more and more restricted to voters with ideological optima close to  $P_1$ 's policy optimum (Golden and Chang, 2001). In other cases like the 'dominant party' periods cited for the UK, France and Canada, much milder instances of competition being distorted or political power being arrogantly used seem to have contributed to limiting the governing coalition's popularity to less than majority support (Boucek, 2001). Hence it seems feasible that the slopes for  $P_1$  can come to decline *more* steeply than those for other parties.

One might also envisage that the dominant party could develop inverted U-shaped ideology/effectiveness slopes, declining slowly at first, perhaps for all those voters for whom  $P_1$ 's effectiveness exceeds  $e_a$ , but then falling steeply thereafter. This kind of pattern and the underlying dynamic of citizens' partial disillusionment with continuous partisan control of government, and possible misuse of the incumbent party's power, help explain why dominant parties rarely accrete support in any continuous manner despite disposing of strong preference-shaping capabilities. Any reduction in  $P_1$ 's effectiveness advantage reduces the size of its core vote. If  $\alpha$  seems to be lessened, so that  $P_1$ 's slopes fall away more steeply, then it also becomes harder for the dominant party to shift position and attract completely the vote base of a deeply convergent rival.

These considerations lead into the final proposition of the approach adopted here:

8. A dominant party (one with singular higher efficacy than all its rivals) can lose office for a time, possibly even a prolonged period, without necessarily ceasing to be a dominant party. A dominant party must have a substantial and prolonged effectiveness advantage, but this does not mean that the party should continuously retain office. A party with such an advantage could still lose an election for the following reasons:

- (i)  $P_1$ 's effectiveness advantage has partially declined, but the party does not appreciate its weakened position in time to seek to take corrective measures, for example, by shifting its policy position or choosing a new more effective leader;
- (ii)  $P_1$  is positioned poorly viz a viz the median voter, or the peak of the ADP curve, and given the nature of the salient threats to its support. If the dominant party comes under threat from a salient opposition group but fails to shift its own policy stance towards the threat, it can easily lose an unexpectedly large bloc of voters. Alternatively the ADP curve may move away from  $P_1$ 's chosen policy position, reducing the party's popularity if the leadership is unwilling or unable (perhaps because of factional balance constraints) to adapt to changing times.
- (iii)  $P_1$  is exposed to simultaneous deep convergence by more left and more right wing opponents, perhaps triggered by factional exiters from the dominant party itself, or by increased crowding of the party system pushing some opposition parties to switch towards deeply convergent strategies. The 'dual front' problem also means that  $P_1$  cannot shift its policy stance without moving away from the peak levels of the ADP curve, and thus cutting into its existing support.
- (iv)  $P_1$ 's appeal outside its core vote bloc has been reduced by a lessening  $\alpha$  angle in its umbrella slopes, or a shift to an inverted U shape, a narrowing of its appeal which reduces its competitiveness and also may erode its ability to change position.

All these problems can also be potentially countered, so that the dominant party after losing control of government for a term, or entering into a coalition with other parties for a period, or just seeming to 'wobble' in its hegemonic position for a while, can none the less restore its competitive position and regain relatively secure



control of government power. The key tactics involved will be related to the four points above.  $P_1$ 's leadership may recognize a need for more radical actions to renew or restore the party's effectiveness advantage, perhaps a more explicit use of preference-shaping strategies, or an overdue institutional reform (like the transition from SNTV to a parallel voting system in Japan in the mid 1990s). The party may move its policy positions to re-appeal to the largest feasible group of voters around the main peak of the ADP curve. Deeply convergent opposition parties could be eliminated by persuading dissident factions to rejoin  $P_1$  (in return for policy shifts or personal payoffs to faction leaders). Even if only one 'side' of  $P_1$ 's dual front problem can be solved in this way, it may free up the dominant party to change position so as to re-absorb voters on the other side who would otherwise have been attracted to a deeply convergent opponent. Finally the dominant party may seek to re-broaden its appeal by defusing some of the de-legitimizing effects of its own dominance. For instance, to increase its  $\alpha$  angle again the  $P_1$  leadership could: choose new younger or cleaner leaders; it could seek to maintain or revive its democratically organized branch structures (Lodge, 2004); accept anti-corruption or anti-malversation measures (such as more judicial supervision of office-holders, or special anti-corruption institutions); countenance power-sharing or coalitions with opposition groupings (as the Japanese Liberal Democrats did in the mid 1990s, while the Italian Christian Democrats joined broader coalition governments from the 1970s onwards)); or implement institutional changes which pluralize the political system somewhat, perhaps by creating enhanced opportunities for opposition parties to win control of sub-national governments (such as the regional government changes in Italy in the mid 1970s).

Dominant parties under threat can also be 'gifted' by a number of favourable developments which might help restore their fortunes. Any developments which reduce the level of crowding in a party system are helpful for  $P_1$ , by encouraging opposition parties to avoid deep convergence in favour of clear-water strategies. Two possibilities are especially important. The feasibility boundaries in the political system may widen for exogenous reasons, as with the contextual change in many Western party systems with the collapse of eastern bloc and later Soviet communism and the end of the Cold War in 1989-91. Alternatively citizens' scepticism about voting for all political parties may increase, raising  $e_{\min}$  in a way which is much more

serious for opposition parties at the  $e_a$  level than for the dominant party higher up at the  $e_1$  level. Finally in non-proportional electoral systems a dominant party on the rebound may be gifted by electoral system effects which severely or even drastically penalize its principal opponents. In 1996 the Canadian Liberals were virtually guaranteed a prolonged period of office when the Progressive Conservatives were reduced by plurality rule effects and the growth of new opposition parties on their right from being the incumbent government with an overall House of Commons majority to holding just three seats. Sometimes these favourable developments may occur for exogenous reasons, beyond  $P_1$ 's control. At other times the dominant party may be able to facilitate these favourable changes. For instance,  $P_1$  may be able to help along rising  $e_{\min}$  levels by measures which depress voters' turnout or which appear to bind opposition parties into complicity with de-legitimizing aspects of the polity, such as the 'spoils system' or political corruption.

One radical implication of the approach adopted here is that in some circumstances (and only in political systems with two 'major' parties using non-proportional voting methods) a period of dominance by party A may be succeeded almost immediately or after only a brief interregnum by a period of dominance by party B. The leading candidate for such a transition would be Britain in the mid 1990s. The Conservative hegemony under Thatcher and Major from 1979 to late 1992 (encompassing four successive general election victories, two with landslide majorities) terminated in winter 1992 following the UK's forced ejection from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. The opinion polls showed a decisive reversal of fortunes within three months of this key event, which then endured up to the 1997 election. The Conservatives were reduced to a non-competitive rump by Labour's landslide win, repeated almost exactly in 2001, inaugurating what now seems certain to be a pattern of Labour hegemony spanning at least three successive elections.

## Conclusions

Parties do not become dominant by holding government incumbency for prolonged or unbroken periods, but by possessing a relatively long-lasting efficacy advantage over all opponents. In turn this means that they can deny a significant section of the ideological spectrum (or two-dimensional space) to any other rival party, threatening

to strip all votes away from an opponent which converges too far on their policy position. Thus a dominant party is one that has a protected core vote which it can maintain whatever ideological stance it adopts, although it can also lose substantial levels of support at its peripheries. A dominant party may well be able to maintain its effectiveness advantage even if it loses governmental power temporarily, or even for a relatively extended period. The electoral fortunes of dominant parties can fluctuate considerably while they none the less retain a substantial effectiveness advantage. Some of the influences on the dominant party's level of success have to do with its own choices of policy positions. But others concern the strategies adopted by the opposition parties and the level of co-ordination amongst these rivals for power. Dominant party systems have some interesting dynamics of their own, in particular the key tension for opposition parties between adopting clear-water or deeply convergent strategies, and the extent to which factional conflicts within the dominant party result in exits and new party formations or not.

The model developed here uses a relatively straightforward analytic apparatus, but one which succeeds much better than previous inductive approaches to dominant party systems in separating out the major influences at work. The key to further research in this vein will be our ability to develop effective, independent empirical measures of the leading party's effectiveness advantage, and to operationalize measures of how the parties' ideology/effectiveness slopes are configured. These data need to be set alongside the existing well-developed measures of the parties' chosen positions in policy/ideology space and of the shape of ADP curves across different countries' electorates.

## Notes

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