Implications of Issue Salience for Political Competition

Assume voters have ideal points over a multidimensional issue space, such that each voter prefers positions in the space that are closer to his/her own ideal point. Further, suppose that two candidates occupy positions in the space that they cannot change. Then, if voters chose between the candidates ideal points based upon Euclidean distances over exogenously determined dimensions, one candidate would receive a majority of votes. However, we suggest that candidates compete by persuading voters to change their conception of overall distance to reflect the relative salience of different issue dimensions, and by convincing voters that a particular single issue dimension is the one that should determine their choice. We show that it is generally possible for each candidate to find some presentation of the choice such that a majority of voters prefer that candidate. Thus, competition over the salience of issue dimensions can be crucial for determining election outcomes. Furthermore, we show that changing the relative salience of issue dimensions generally involves important non-monotonicities, i.e., changing the weights in a particular direction may lead to a complex pattern of gains for one candidate, then for the other, and then for the first, etc. We provide a geometric framework to understand how issue dimension weightings affect candidate choice. Then we demonstrate the empirical relevance of our results with data on two issue dimensions of political competition over several recent U.S. presidential elections.