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Are opposite-order equilibria impossible?

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Abstract

An opposite-order platform profile occurs when parties choose platforms in the opposite order from their ideal points. Such an outcome undermines the usual ideological interpretation of party competition: the party identified as left chooses the right-hand platform, while the party identified as right chooses the left-hand platform. We study a two-party ordinal spatial voting model in which voter and party preferences are single-peaked. Under full turnout, we show that single-peakedness alone rules out opposite-order equilibria. With endogenous abstention, we identify an additional ordinal condition: parties agree on how to rank deviations on either side of their ideal points. We call this *cross-side agreement*. Cardinal utilities that are commonly used in the literature, like symmetric single-peaked utilities and common translated utility shapes, satisfy this condition. Under single-peakedness and cross-side agreement, opposite-order equilibria are impossible even with abstention. The assumption is tight: we construct an example admitting a unique pure-strategy Nash equilibrium with opposite order in which cross-side agreement fails.

Keywords: spatial voting, electoral competition, abstention, single-peaked preferences, opposite order

JEL Codes: D72, D71, C72

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1 Introduction

In spatial competition, electoral incentives may pull a party away from its ideal point, while ideological preferences pull it back. The question is whether these forces can produce an *opposite-order equilibrium*: an equilibrium in which the left party chooses a platform to the right of the right party’s platform. Empirically, such platform orderings appear rare: [Adams \(2001\)](#) reports that parties differentiate their policy positions and move within ideologically delimited regions of the policy space.

A natural theoretical answer is single-peakedness. Since [Black \(1948\)](#), single-peaked preferences around an ideal point have been a central restriction in social choice theory. In the policy-motivated candidate tradition, [Wittman \(1983\)](#) develops a model in which candidates have policy preferences as well as an interest in winning; later models often represent these preferences by concave cardinal utilities around an ideal point. These cardinal specifications imply single-peakedness, but they also impose more structure than single-peakedness alone. We ask whether single-peakedness itself is enough to rule out opposite-order equilibria.

We start with an ordinal voting model. Voters rank policies, parties rank their own platforms, and party objectives are office-first: winning is preferred to tying, and tying is preferred to losing. Conditional on the same electoral outcome, each party compares profiles by its own ideological preference over platforms. The electoral outcome is decided by the vote margin.

In the benchmark model, single-peakedness is sufficient. If all voters participate, no pure-strategy equilibrium can have opposite order. More generally, the same conclusion holds whenever the set of participating voters is independent of the parties’ platforms. The intuition is that a party choosing the platform on the opposite side can move back toward its own ideal point without losing electoral support. We also record a simple structural fact. In a two-party equilibrium with opposite order, each party’s platform lies beyond the other party’s ideal point.

Full turnout is a standard benchmark that rarely holds in actual elections. Standard social-choice models usually treat the voters’ expressed preferences as given, even though many voters abstain. Whether a voter’s preferences are expressed depends on her choice to vote, which these models typically abstract from ([Hayden, 2010](#)). This matters in our model because abstention allows a party’s deviation in platform to change not only which party a voter supports, but whether she votes at all. We use the two standard spatial reasons for abstention: alienation and indifference. Voters may abstain because the available platforms are too far from their ideal points, or because the platforms are too similar to justify voting ([Anderson and Glomm, 1992](#); [Llavador, 2000](#)). In our model, a voter is willing to vote only if at least one platform is acceptable to her, and she casts a vote only when she strictly prefers one platform to the other.

With abstention, single-peakedness alone is not enough to rule out opposite-order equilibria. We give an example with four voters and seven policies in which voter and party preferences are single-peaked and the unique pure-strategy Nash equilibrium has opposite order. The uniqueness matters: the example does not select an opposite-order profile from a larger set of familiar pure-strategy equilibria. The example shows that endogenous participation can make the full-turnout argument fail.

The example motivates an additional condition that restores the impossibility result. Single-

peakedness requires alternatives farther from an ideal point to be ranked lower when they lie on the same side of that ideal point. It does not compare alternatives on opposite sides. A party may therefore prefer a large deviation on one side of its ideal point to a smaller deviation on the other side while remaining single-peaked. In the example, the two parties disagree exactly on such cross-side comparisons.

The final result shows that the impossibility theorem is restored under agreement on cross-side comparisons: the parties rank each right-left displacement pair in the same way. This condition is implied by symmetric single-peaked utilities and by common translated utility shapes, while remaining weaker than both. Under single-peakedness and agreement on cross-side comparisons, no pure-strategy equilibrium has opposite order, even with abstention.

Section 2 defines the model and shows that any opposite-order equilibrium places each party's platform beyond the other party's ideal point. Section 3 proves the fixed-participation impossibility result and gives the abstention example. Section 4 introduces agreement on cross-side comparisons. Section 5 proves the final impossibility theorem.

2 Model

Let

$$X = \{x_j : j \in I\}, \quad x_j < x_{j+1},$$

where $I \subseteq \mathbb{Z}$ is an interval of integers. Thus X may be finite or countably infinite. The integer index records position in the linear order: x_{j+k} is k steps to the right of x_j , whenever $j+k \in I$.

There are two parties, A and B , with ideal points $\tau_A = x_p$ and $\tau_B = x_q$, where $p < q$. Each party $i \in \{A, B\}$ has a weak preference order $\succeq_i$ over X , with unique ideal point τ_i . We write $x \succ_i y$ when $x \succeq_i y$ holds while $y \succeq_i x$ fails.

Axiom 2.1 (Single-peakedness of party preferences). *For each party $i \in \{A, B\}$, the preference order $\succeq_i$ is single-peaked with peak τ_i : if $x_a < x_b \leq \tau_i$, then $x_b \succ_i x_a$; and if $\tau_i \leq x_b < x_a$, then $x_b \succ_i x_a$.*

Axiom 2.1 is the standard single-peakedness condition on a line. It ranks alternatives on the same side of the peak by proximity to the peak, but imposes no restriction on comparisons between alternatives lying on opposite sides of the peak.

Remark 2.2 (Ordinal displacement notation). For later use, we introduce signed ordinal displacement notation. If $\tau_i = x_c$, define $R_i(k) = x_{c+k}$ and $L_i(k) = x_{c-k}$, whenever these policies belong to X . Thus $R_i(k)$ and $L_i(k)$ denote the policies k ordinal steps to the right and left of party i 's ideal point. By Axiom 2.1, for each party i ,

$$\tau_i \succ_i R_i(1) \succ_i R_i(2) \succ_i \cdots \quad \text{and} \quad \tau_i \succ_i L_i(1) \succ_i L_i(2) \succ_i \cdots,$$

whenever the corresponding policies belong to X . Axiom 2.1 imposes no restriction on comparisons of the form $R_i(a)$ versus $L_i(b)$.

A party's strategy is a policy in X . We refer to the policies chosen by the parties as their *platforms*. If party A chooses $s \in X$ and party B chooses $t \in X$, we call (s, t) a *platform profile*.

Electoral outcomes

We use an ordinal version of [Llavador \(2000\)](#)'s alienation rule for a finite electorate. Instead of requiring a party platform to lie within a fixed distance of the voter's ideal point, we require a party platform to lie in the voter's acceptable interval. These intervals may differ across voters.

The electorate is a finite set V . Each voter $v \in V$ has an ideal point $\theta_v = x_{c_v} \in X$, strict single-peaked preferences over X with peak θ_v , and an acceptable set $A_v \subseteq X$. We assume A_v is an interval in the policy order and contains θ_v .

Given platforms (s, t) , voter v is active if $s \in A_v$ or $t \in A_v$. If active, voter v votes for the platform she strictly prefers. If she is indifferent between the two platforms, she abstains. In particular, if $s = t$, no active voter strictly prefers one party to the other.

Let $N_A(s, t)$ be the number of active voters who strictly prefer s to t , and let $N_B(s, t)$ be the number of active voters who strictly prefer t to s . Define $g : X \times X \rightarrow \{A, B, T\}$ by

$$g(s, t) = \begin{cases} A, & N_A(s, t) > N_B(s, t), \\ B, & N_B(s, t) > N_A(s, t), \\ T, & N_A(s, t) = N_B(s, t). \end{cases}$$

Here T denotes a tied electoral outcome. Since $g(s, s) = T$ for every $s \in X$, copying the opponent's platform always produces a tie. For party A , outcome A is a win and outcome B is a loss; for party B , outcome B is a win and outcome A is a loss.

Party objectives

Parties first rank electoral outcomes:

$$\text{Win} \succ \text{Tie} \succ \text{Lose}.$$

Conditional on the same electoral outcome, each party ranks profiles by its own announced platform. Thus, if $g(s, t) = g(s', t')$, then party A weakly prefers (s, t) to (s', t') if and only if $s \succeq_A s'$, and party B weakly prefers (s, t) to (s', t') if and only if $t \succeq_B t'$.

The objective is lexicographic. A party first compares electoral outcomes. It uses its ideological preference only when two deviations give the same electoral outcome. Thus a party never trades off a better electoral outcome against a more preferred platform.

A pure-strategy Nash equilibrium is a platform profile $(s, t) \in X \times X$ such that neither party has a strictly profitable unilateral deviation under this lexicographic ordering.

Definition 2.3. A platform profile (s, t) has *opposite order* if $t < s$. Each party's platform lies beyond the other party's ideal point if

$$t < \tau_A < \tau_B < s.$$

A Nash equilibrium has opposite order if its equilibrium profile does.

Since $\tau_A < \tau_B$, opposite order means that the left party chooses the right platform and the

right party chooses the left platform. The next proposition shows that, in any opposite-order equilibrium, each party's platform lies beyond the other party's ideal point.

Proposition 2.4 (Opposite order places platforms beyond both ideal points). *Suppose Axiom 2.1 holds. Let (s, t) be a pure-strategy Nash equilibrium with $t < s$. Then the election is tied at (s, t) , and*

$$t < \tau_A < \tau_B < s.$$

Proof. The election must be tied. If one party loses, it can copy the opponent's platform and obtain a tie, which is strictly better than losing. Since party A 's deviation to t gives a tie, equilibrium requires $s \succeq_A t$. If $\tau_A \leq t < s$, then t is closer than s to τ_A on the same side, so single-peakedness gives $t \succ_A s$, a contradiction. Hence $t < \tau_A$. Similarly we can conclude $\tau_B < s$. Since $\tau_A < \tau_B$, the result follows. $\square$

Proposition 2.4 uses only the fact that copying the opponent's platform produces a tie. The next section isolates the role of abstention.

3 Single-peakedness is not sufficient

We first show that opposite order is impossible when the set of participating voters does not change with the pair of platforms. We then give a simple example with four voters and seven policies in which the equilibrium has opposite order: all voters participate at the equilibrium profile, but some deviations change who participates.

Proposition 3.1. *Suppose the set of active voters is the same at every platform profile (s, t) with $s \neq t$. Then no pure-strategy Nash equilibrium has opposite order.*

Proof. Suppose, toward a contradiction, that (s, t) is a pure-strategy Nash equilibrium with opposite order. Then by Proposition 2.4, the election must be tied and we have $t < \tau_A < \tau_B < s$.

We claim that party A 's deviation from s to τ_A cannot reduce its number of votes. Let v be any voter who votes for s against t . Since $t < \tau_A < s$, single-peakedness of voter preferences implies that v also prefers τ_A to t . Indeed, if v 's peak lies weakly to the left of t , then $t \succ_v s$, a contradiction. If the peak lies between t and τ_A , then $\tau_A \succ_v s$, hence $\tau_A \succ_v t$. If the peak lies weakly to the right of τ_A , then $\tau_A \succ_v t$.

By assumption, the same voters are active at (τ_A, t) as at (s, t) . Therefore every voter counted for party A at (s, t) is still counted for party A at (τ_A, t) . Since (s, t) is tied, party A obtains either a tie or a win after deviating to τ_A .

If it wins, the deviation is profitable. If it ties, the electoral outcome is unchanged and $\tau_A \succ_A s$, since τ_A is party A 's unique ideal point. In either case party A has a profitable deviation, contradicting equilibrium. $\square$

The example below shows what abstention changes. At the unique equilibrium profile all voters are active, but deviations can change which voters are active. The example uses seven policies and four voters.

Let $X = \{x_1, \dots, x_7\}$, with $x_1 < \dots < x_7$. The parties' ideal points are $\tau_A = x_3$ and $\tau_B = x_5$. Party preferences are strict and given by

$$\begin{aligned} A: & \quad x_3 \succ_A x_4 \succ_A x_5 \succ_A x_6 \succ_A x_2 \succ_A x_1 \succ_A x_7, \\ B: & \quad x_5 \succ_B x_4 \succ_B x_3 \succ_B x_2 \succ_B x_6 \succ_B x_1 \succ_B x_7. \end{aligned}$$

Both preferences are single-peaked. Party A 's right side is ranked $x_3 \succ_A x_4 \succ_A x_5 \succ_A x_6 \succ_A x_7$, and its left side is ranked $x_3 \succ_A x_2 \succ_A x_1$. Party B 's left side is ranked $x_5 \succ_B x_4 \succ_B x_3 \succ_B x_2 \succ_B x_1$, and its right side is ranked $x_5 \succ_B x_6 \succ_B x_7$.

There are four voters, two on each side. Their ideal points are $\theta_{v_1} = x_1$, $\theta_{v_2} = x_2$, $\theta_{v_6} = x_6$, and $\theta_{v_7} = x_7$. Their acceptable sets are

$$A_{v_1} = \{x_1, x_2\}, \quad A_{v_2} = \{x_1, x_2, x_3\},$$

and

$$A_{v_6} = \{x_5, x_6, x_7\}, \quad A_{v_7} = \{x_6, x_7\}.$$

Their preferences are strict and single-peaked:

$$\begin{aligned} v_1: & \quad x_1 \succ x_2 \succ x_3 \succ x_4 \succ x_5 \succ x_6 \succ x_7, \\ v_2: & \quad x_2 \succ x_1 \succ x_3 \succ x_4 \succ x_5 \succ x_6 \succ x_7, \\ v_6: & \quad x_6 \succ x_5 \succ x_7 \succ x_4 \succ x_3 \succ x_2 \succ x_1, \\ v_7: & \quad x_7 \succ x_6 \succ x_5 \succ x_4 \succ x_3 \succ x_2 \succ x_1. \end{aligned}$$

At the profile $(s, t) = (x_6, x_2)$, all four voters are active. Voters v_1 and v_2 vote for party B , while voters v_6 and v_7 vote for party A . Hence $g(x_6, x_2) = T$. The unilateral deviations are summarized in the following table:

	x_1	x_2	x_3	x_4	x_5	x_6	x_7
$g(\cdot, x_2)$	T	T	B	B	B	T	T
$g(x_6, \cdot)$	T	T	A	A	A	T	T

Against x_2 , party A 's non-losing platforms are x_1, x_2, x_6, x_7 , and A strictly prefers x_6 to all three alternatives. Against x_6 , party B 's non-losing platforms are x_1, x_2, x_6, x_7 , and B strictly prefers x_2 to all three alternatives. Thus (x_6, x_2) is a pure-strategy Nash equilibrium. Since

$$x_2 < \tau_A = x_3 < \tau_B = x_5 < x_6,$$

the equilibrium exhibits opposite-ordering.

We finally check that the equilibrium is unique. The best-response correspondences are single-valued. For party A , the best response to party B 's platform is

t	x_1	x_2	x_3	x_4	x_5	x_6	x_7
$BR_A(t)$	x_6	x_6	x_6	x_3	x_6	x_6	x_5

For party B , the best response to party A 's platform is

s	x_1	x_2	x_3	x_4	x_5	x_6	x_7
$BR_B(s)$	x_2	x_2	x_2	x_5	x_2	x_2	x_5 .

The only common fixed point of these correspondences is

$$(s, t) = (x_6, x_2).$$

Hence (x_6, x_2) is the unique pure-strategy Nash equilibrium.

4 Agreement on cross-side comparisons

Single-peakedness does not compare leftward and rightward deviations. We impose the following ordinal condition.

Axiom 4.1 (Agreement on cross-side comparisons). *For all $a, b \in \mathbb{Z}_{>0}$ for which the corresponding policies belong to X ,*

$$R_A(a) \succeq_A L_A(b) \iff R_B(a) \succeq_B L_B(b),$$

and

$$L_A(b) \succeq_A R_A(a) \iff L_B(b) \succeq_B R_B(a).$$

Axiom 4.1 requires agreement only on cross-side comparisons. For every $a, b > 0$ for which the relevant policies exist, the parties agree on the ranking of the pair $\{R_i(a), L_i(b)\}$. The axiom allows left-right asymmetry; it rules out disagreement between the parties over the same cross-side pair.

The condition is implied by standard cardinal restrictions.

Proposition 4.2. *Axiom 4.1 is implied by each of the following assumptions.*

(i) **Cardinal symmetric single-peaked utilities.** *For each party i , there is a strictly decreasing function*

$$\phi_i : \mathbb{Z}_{\geq 0} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$$

such that, if $\tau_i = x_c$, then

$$v_i(x_m) = \phi_i(|m - c|).$$

(ii) **Common translated utility shape.** *There is a function*

$$u : \mathbb{Z} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$$

such that, if $\tau_i = x_c$, then

$$v_i(x_m) = u(m - c).$$

Proof. Under (i),

$$R_i(a) \succeq_i L_i(b) \iff \phi_i(a) \geq \phi_i(b) \iff a \leq b,$$

and

$$L_i(b) \succeq_i R_i(a) \iff \phi_i(b) \geq \phi_i(a) \iff b \leq a.$$

Both conditions are independent of i . Hence the two parties agree on the full ranking of their respective policies $R_i(a)$ and $L_i(b)$, so Axiom 4.1 holds.

Under (ii),

$$R_i(a) \succeq_i L_i(b) \iff u(a) \geq u(-b),$$

and

$$L_i(b) \succeq_i R_i(a) \iff u(-b) \geq u(a).$$

Both right-hand sides are independent of i . Hence the two parties again agree on the full ranking of their respective policies $R_i(a)$ and $L_i(b)$, so Axiom 4.1 holds. $\square$

Axiom 4.1 is weaker than either condition in Proposition 4.2. Cardinal symmetry implies $R_i(k) \sim_i L_i(k)$ for every k such that both policies exist, while Axiom 4.1 allows common left-right asymmetry. A common translated utility shape imposes a common numerical representation over signed deviations; Axiom 4.1 keeps only the induced ordinal ranking of each cross-side pair $R_i(a), L_i(b)$.

5 Impossibility of opposite-order equilibria under abstention

Theorem 5.1 (Impossibility of opposite-order equilibria). *Suppose Axioms 2.1 and 4.1 hold. There do not exist policies $s, t \in X$ such that*

$$t < \tau_A < \tau_B < s$$

and

$$s \succeq_A t, \quad t \succeq_B s.$$

Proof. Suppose, to the contrary, that such s, t exist. Write

$$s = x_u, \quad t = x_r, \quad r < p < q < u.$$

Let

$$\Delta = q - p > 0, \quad a = u - q > 0, \quad b = p - r > 0.$$

Then

$$s = R_A(a + \Delta) = R_B(a), \quad t = L_A(b) = L_B(b + \Delta).$$

By Axiom 2.1 and our hypothesis,

$$R_A(a) \succ_A R_A(a + \Delta) = s \succeq_A t = L_A(b),$$

so

$$R_A(a) \succ_A L_A(b).$$

Similarly,

$$L_B(b) \succ_B L_B(b + \Delta) = t \succeq_B s = R_B(a),$$

so

$$L_B(b) \succ_B R_B(a).$$

By Axiom 4.1, $R_A(a) \succ_A L_A(b)$ implies

$$R_B(a) \succeq_B L_B(b),$$

which contradicts $L_B(b) \succ_B R_B(a)$. □

Corollary 5.2. *Under Axioms 2.1 and 4.1, no pure-strategy Nash equilibrium has opposite order.*

Proof. Suppose (s, t) is a pure-strategy Nash equilibrium with opposite order. If $g(s, t) = B$, party A can deviate to t . Since $g(t, t) = T$, this changes party A 's outcome from a loss to a tie, which is strictly profitable. Hence $g(s, t) \neq B$.

If $g(s, t) = A$, party B can deviate to s . Since $g(s, s) = T$, this changes party B 's outcome from a loss to a tie, which is strictly profitable. Hence $g(s, t) \neq A$.

Therefore $g(s, t) = T$. Since party A 's deviation to t also yields a tie, equilibrium requires

$$s \succeq_A t.$$

Since party B 's deviation to s also yields a tie, equilibrium requires

$$t \succeq_B s.$$

By Proposition 2.4, the profile satisfies $t < \tau_A < \tau_B < s$, which contradicts Theorem 5.1. □

6 Conclusion

The paper identifies the preference assumptions behind the impossibility of opposite-order equilibria in spatial voting. If the participating electorate is fixed across platform profiles, single-peakedness is enough to rule out opposite order. The standard full-turnout case is a special case of this result.

Endogenous participation changes the argument. When voters may abstain because no platform is acceptable or because they do not strictly prefer one platform to the other, a unilateral deviation can change the electorate that evaluates the platforms. An example shows that this matters: single-peaked voter and party preferences can support a unique pure-strategy Nash equilibrium with opposite order.

The positive result is that the impossibility of opposite-order equilibria can be recovered without imposing a full cardinal utility specification. One sufficient condition is agreement on

opposite-side comparisons. Single-peakedness controls rankings along each side of an ideal point, but it does not say how a party compares a leftward deviation with a rightward deviation. Once the parties agree on such comparisons, opposite-order equilibria are again impossible, even with abstention.

Thus the issue is not abstention alone. The issue is whether the ordinal structure of party preferences is rich enough to compare the deviations that equilibrium analysis requires. Symmetric utilities and common translated utility shapes contain this structure. The cross-side agreement condition isolates it directly.

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