

## ON DUVERGER AND “LAWS OF POLITICS”

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Weber (2022) argues that my claims about “laws of politics” (Cuzán 2015, 2019), although grounded in an “impressive” “evidence base,” cannot be taken as such on two grounds. A key concept is unspecified and an adequate “argumentative strategy” is lacking. Here I respond to Professor Weber.

Weber accepts my concept of “a law of politics,” to wit: “an invariant or almost invariant empirical regularity that is descriptive of intrinsic properties of politics and the state’.” Then he highlights three “important feature[s]” of this definition. A “law of politics” is empirical, need not be deterministic, and describes something distinctive about politics and the state. However, he argues, the ontological and epistemological status of an alleged “law” is in doubt until two philosophical requirements are met:

(1) The empirical regularity displays spatiotemporal stability and

(2) A causal mechanism is theoretically specified

For illustration, Weber cites Duverger’s famous laws connecting what the illustrious French politologist called “the system of balloting” and “the system of parties” (1959, 205). A “mechanical effect” is the product of the “electoral regime,” which in turn produces a “psychological effect” as voters and parties adapt to its results. Case in point: the single member district plurality system. Under it, citizens become reluctant to waste

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their votes on parties that, while closer to their preferences, stand little or no chance to win seats, while politicians opt to work within or ally themselves with one of the two major parties in order to remain viable.<sup>1</sup>

As it happens, in Duverger's book one finds elements for an argumentative strategy in support of the "five laws of politics."

[T]he two party system seems to correspond to the nature of things, that is to say that political choice usually takes the form of a choice between two alternatives.

A duality of parties does not always exist, but *almost always* there is a duality of tendencies. Every policy implies a choice between two kinds of solutions: the so-called compromise solutions lean one way or the other. This is equivalent to saying that the centre does not exist in politics. . . . The term 'centre' is applied to the geometrical spot at which the moderates of opposed tendencies meet:

moderates of the Right and moderates of the Left. . . . The fate of the Centre is to be torn asunder, buffeted and annihilated: torn asunder when one of its halves votes Right and the other Left, buffeted when it votes as a group first Right and then Left, annihilated when it abstains from voting. . . ." (Duverger 1959, 215; emphasis added).

Per Duverger, elections in democracy present the electorate with two dualities: to vote or to abstain; if to vote, to do so for the party of the president or prime minister (or one of its partners or allies in government), or for one in opposition. As shown in Cuzán (2019, 459) on average 25% of the electorate abstains and of those who show up, 40% vote for the incumbents, for a support rate lower than 35%, on average. Less than 3% exceed 50% support. Thus, "the law of minority rule." The outcome of any election is

decided by Duverger's "moderates," who lean one way in one election and the opposite way in another depending on a number of things, one being how far policy strays to the Right or the Left from the "geometric spot" (Budge 2020; Wlezien 2017). Chance also plays a part (Budge 2020; Heggen and Cuzán 2022a, forthcoming; Heggen and Cuzán 2022b). Thus, "the law of electoral equipoise" (Cuzán 2022, 36), the outcome of two other laws, "the law of shrinking support" and "the law of the 60% maximum."<sup>2</sup>

Adducing to the "machines" in the United States, Duverger spoke of the "legal and illegal advantages" that "positions of power" bestow (1959, 147-148). Thus, with the proviso that these advantages, helpful if nothing else to staying in office, are available to a greater or lesser extent in all regimes, "the law of incumbent advantage." In democracies, this results in incumbents winning re-election more than half the time and, when they do, taking in about four percentage points more than when the opposition drives them from office (Cuzán, 2019, 459).

As for a mechanical effect, in a democracy political rights and civil liberties allow the electorate to make the choices of which Duverger spoke. Citizens pick among parties or leaders or stay home if they find no appealing options, believe their votes make no difference, or have no interest in politics. The "out" parties exploit freedoms of speech, press and assembly to criticize the incumbents and mobilize their supporters, calling attention to mistakes and "extremism" in policy, incompetent or corrupt administration, scandals, and so on. Dictatorships, by contrast, do not allow citizens to make free choices among competing parties and, at their worst, compel them to turn out to vote for the dominant or sole party in a farcical show of unanimity. The moment a dictatorship holds a more or less free election, however, "as if pulled by an irresistible

law of political gravity, like an avalanche, incumbent vote plunges from its artificial highs” (Cuzán 2022, 72).

In the foregoing, “the intrinsic nature of politics and the state,” previously left undefined, is implied. Making it explicit: The state is an entity whose decisions are binding on all members subject to them. It is coercive in nature. A struggle for its control is, then, in Duverger’s phrase, “in the nature of things.” What democracy does is to constrain the incumbents in the use of state power, especially against critics and rivals, allow a greater variety of inputs into policy-making, and generate a more diverse ruling class organized into competing party oligarchies offering different solutions to public problems. With two parties or multi-party “tendencies” regularly taking turns at governing, a “political equilibrium,” perhaps something like what Duverger had in mind (1959, 424-425), is maintained.

Having clarified the meaning of “the very nature of politics and the state,” and invoked two mechanisms, one drawn from Duverger himself, connecting several “laws of politics,” I conclude with a demonstration of the spatiotemporal stability of their manifestation in what is arguably the signal characteristic of democracy (Cuzán 2022b). As shown in Figures 1 and 2, leaders of opposing parties or coalitions alternate in office about once per decade, a statistic that has remained constant across type (parliamentary or presidential) and region (in the developed democracies of the OECD and elsewhere) for a century.<sup>3</sup>

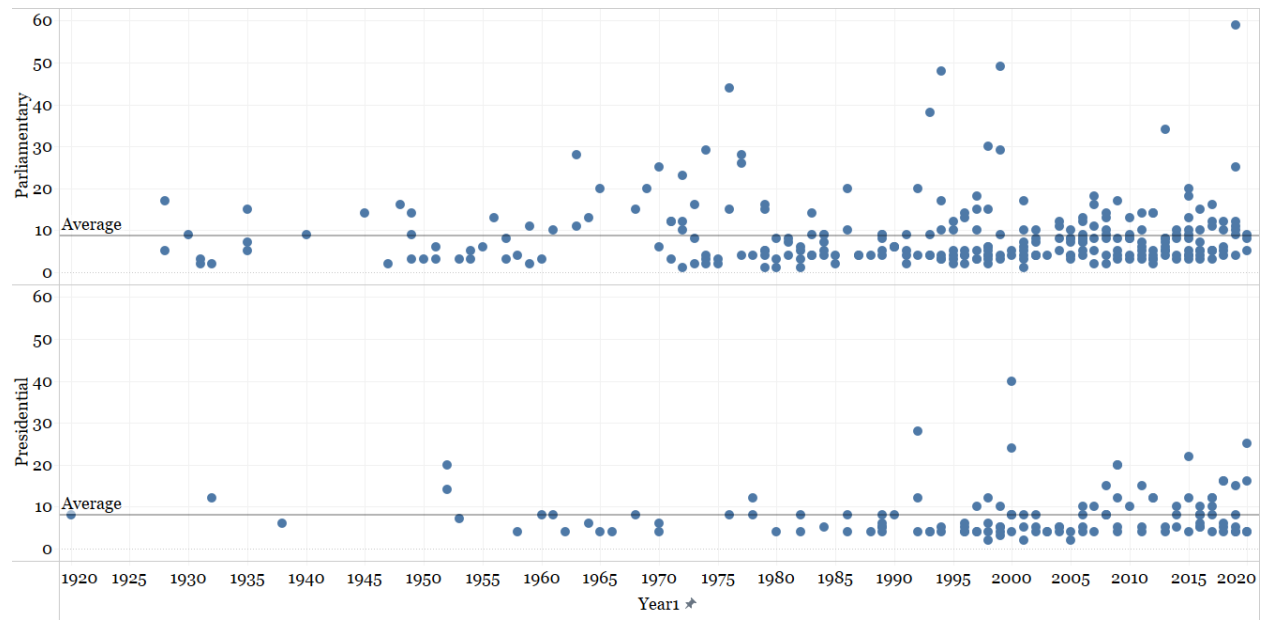
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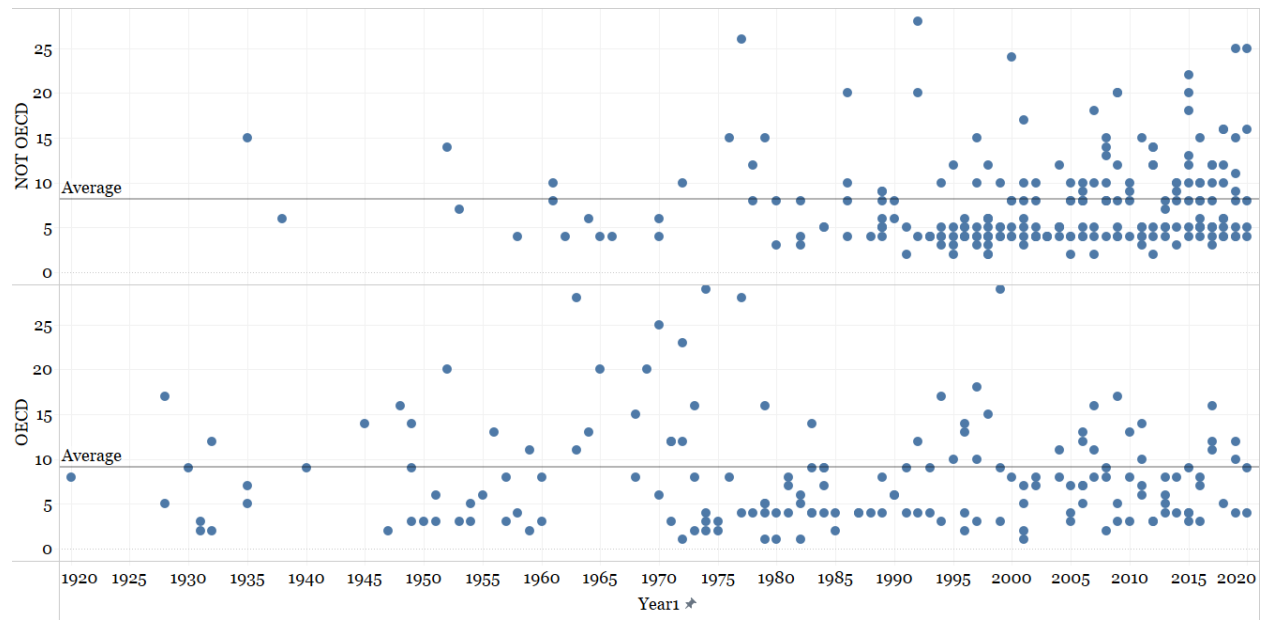
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<sup>1</sup> But see Colomer (2005) for empirical evidence supporting a logical model reversing the arrow of causality.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, it is “the law of the 60% maximum” (not “the law of partials,” as Weber has it) that marks the boundary between democracies and dictatorships which held counterfeit “elections,” as in the now almost extinct communist regimes.

<sup>3</sup> For additional evidence, as well as the source for the data, see Cuzán (2022a, Chs. 5, 8, and 10). Incidentally, figures 5, 6, and 7 in Cuzán (2019, 460-461) show temporal stability in several indicators, although I did not use the term.