



*Ideology  
and Spatial  
Voting in*  
**AMERICAN  
ELECTIONS**

*Stephen A. Jessee*



CAMBRIDGE

# Ideology and Spatial Voting in American Elections

STEPHEN A. JESSEE

*University of Texas at Austin*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA  
www.cambridge.org  
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107638389

© Stephen A. Jessee 2012

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2012

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Jessee, Stephen A., 1980–  
Ideology and spatial voting in American elections / Stephen A. Jessee.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-02570-7 (hardback)

1. Voting – United States. 2. Ideology – United States. I. Title.

JK1967.J43 2012

324.973–dc23 2012010126

ISBN 978-1-107-02570-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-63838-9 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

## Ideology and Spatial Voting in American Elections

*Ideology and Spatial Voting in American Elections* addresses two core issues related to the foundations of democratic governance: how the political views of Americans are structured and how citizens' voting decisions relate to their ideological proximity to the candidates in a given election. Focusing on testing the assumptions and implications of spatial voting, this book connects the theory with empirical analysis of voter preferences and behavior, showing that Americans cast their ballots largely in accordance with spatial voting theory. By carefully deriving the empirical implications of spatial voting theory and through the use of novel survey techniques and statistical methods, Stephen A. Jessee's research shows that voters possess meaningful ideologies that structure their policy beliefs, and powerfully affect their voting decision moderated by partisanship and differing levels of political information. Jessee finds that while voters with lower levels of political information are more influenced by partisanship, independents and better-informed partisans are able to form reasonably accurate perceptions of candidates' ideologies. His findings should reaffirm citizens' faith in the broad functioning of democratic elections.

Stephen A. Jessee is Assistant Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin.

## List of Figures

1.1	Simple Spatial Voting Example	<i>page</i> 6
3.1	2004 Survey Question Example	41
3.2	2008 Survey Question Example	43
3.3	Respondent Policy Position Scree Plots	47
3.4	Ideal Point Model Predicted Response Probabilities	55
3.5	Density of Estimated Ideal Points	56
3.6	Density of Estimated Ideal Points with Senators and Candidates	57
3.7	Estimated Respondent Ideal Points by Primary Participation, 2008 Survey	62
4.1	Examples of Possible Spatial Utility Functions	69
4.2	Deterministic Spatial Voting Example	70
4.3	Precise and Imprecise Spatial Voting Examples	82
4.4	Biased and Unbiased Spatial Voting Examples	85
4.5	Distributions of Estimated Voter Ideology	86
4.6	Predicted Vote Probabilities from Simple Spatial Voting Model	89
4.7	Correspondence Between Issue Structure and Vote Relationships	95
4.8	Predicted Probability of Casting “Spatially Correct” Vote from Simple Spatial Model	97
5.1	Simple Baseline Vote Choice Models	108
5.2	Predicted Vote Probabilities, Varying Intercept Model	111
5.3	Predicted Vote Probabilities, Varying Intercept, and Slope Model	121
5.4	Estimated Effects of Ideology on Vote Choice	126
5.5	Estimated Effects of Partisanship on Vote Choice	128
6.1	Distribution of Estimated Political Information Levels	138

6.2	2004 Predicted Vote Probabilities from Partisan Spatial Model	145
6.3	2008 Predicted Vote Probabilities from Partisan Spatial Model	146
6.4	Simple Baseline Vote Choice Models	148
6.5	Implied Indifference Points by Partisanship and Political Information Level	151
7.1	Estimated Respondent Perceptions of Obama and McCain	162
7.2	Perceptions of Obama and McCain by Party Identification	163
7.3	Perceived Distance from Candidates versus Actual Distance, 2008 Survey	164
7.4	Net Perceptual Biases by Party Identification, 2008 Survey	167
7.5	Predicted Probability of Voting for McCain by Net Perceptual Distance and Party Identification, 2008 Survey	170
8.1	Association Between Party Identification and Vote Choice	178
C.1	Comparison of Simple Additive Ideology Measure with Ideal Point Estimates	205
C.2	Density of Simple Additive Ideal Point Estimates	206
C.3	Predicted Vote Probabilities, Simple Additive Ideology Measure	210
C.4	Predicted Vote Probabilities by Party Identification, Simple Additive Ideology Measure	210
C.5	Predicted Vote Probabilities by Party Identification and Information Level, Simple Additive Ideology Measure, 2004 Survey	211
C.6	Predicted Vote Probabilities by Party Identification and Information Level, Simple Additive Ideology Measure, 2008 Survey	212
D.1	Distributions of Self-Placed Seven-Point Scale Ideology, 2004 and 2008 ANES	215
D.2	Predicted Vote Probabilities, ANES Data	218
D.3	Predicted Vote Probabilities, Varying Intercept Model, ANES Data	218
D.4	Predicted Vote Probabilities, Varying Intercept and Slope Model, ANES Data	219
D.5	Predicted Vote Probabilities from Partisan Spatial Model, 2004 ANES Data	221

## List of Tables

2.1	ANES Self-Reported Ideology by Year	<i>page</i> 26
3.1	2004 Survey Questions	40
3.2	2008 Survey Questions	42
3.3	Associations Between Specific Policy Views, 2008 Survey	45
3.4	Estimated Respondent Ideal Point Medians, 2008 Survey	60
4.1	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters	87
4.2	Estimated Implied Indifference Points	90
4.3	2008 Individual-Issue Voting Model	93
4.4	Proportions of Respondents Casting “Spatially Correct” Votes	98
5.1	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters, Varying Intercept Model	110
5.2	Estimated Implied Indifference Points	113
5.3	Estimated Valence and Partisanship Effects	116
5.4	Equating the Effects of Valence, Partisanship, and Ideology	118
5.5	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters. Varying Intercept and Slope Model	120
6.1	2004 Survey Political Knowledge Items	136
6.2	2008 Survey Political Knowledge Items	137
6.3	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters, Party and Information Model	141
7.1	Respondent Perceptions of Candidate Positions, 2008 Survey	158
7.2	Perceived Distance Regression Model Estimates, 2008 Survey	165
7.3	Perceptions-Based Presidential Vote Choice Model with Party ID, 2008 Survey	169

B.1	Gender	200
B.2	Race	200
B.3	Survey Sample Education Distributions	200
B.4	Survey Sample Age Distributions	201
B.5	2004 Survey Sample Income Distributions	201
B.6	2008 Survey Sample Income Distributions	202
B.7	Survey Sample Political Information Distributions: Knowledge of House Party Control	203
B.8	Survey Sample Political Information Distributions: Which Party Is More Conservative?	203
B.9	Survey Sample Presidential Vote Distributions	203
C.1	Spatial Utility Model Parameter Estimates, Simple Additive Ideology Measure	207
C.2	Spatial Utility Model Parameter Estimates from Varying Intercept Model, Simple Additive Ideology Measure	207
C.3	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters from Varying Intercept, Varying Slope Model, Simple Additive Ideology Measure	208
C.4	Spatial Model with Information Coefficient Estimates, Simple Additive Ideology and Information Measures	208
D.1	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters, ANES Data	216
D.2	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters Varying Intercept Model, ANES Data	217
D.3	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters Varying Intercept, Varying Slope Model, ANES Data	217
D.4	Estimated Spatial Utility Model Parameters from Party and Information Spatial Model, ANES Data	220



## Preface

This book is about the policy views of ordinary Americans and how these views relate to the choices they make in elections. More fundamentally, it is about how well the political behavior of voters can be described by a simple formalized theory called spatial voting.

Early on in my political science training, I was struck by what I viewed as a large disconnect in the way political scientists thought about voters. On the one hand, many theories dealing with the behavior of candidates, members of Congress, or others abstracted away voter behavior, either explicitly or implicitly, as conforming to some simple decision-making rule. Most commonly, it was assumed or implied that voters cast their ballots for the candidate who was closest to them in some ideological space. By contrast, the empirical political behavior literature spent much of its time chronicling the idiosyncrasies and overall lack of political competence among the vast majority of voters, often concluding that the electorate was incapable of making reasoned choices based on ideological concerns. The stark contrast between these two views struck me as fundamentally problematic. Either most of mainstream political behavior was ignoring a simple, direct, and elegant explanation of voting or much of the existing theory about the behavior of candidates and elected officials rested on unsound foundations.

My initial efforts to investigate these ideas came up against a significant stumbling block. Testing spatial theories of voting would require knowing the ideological positions of voters and candidates for office on the same ideological scale. But to the extent that useful measures of voter ideology and candidate positions existed, they were generally not comparable in any meaningful way. My discovery of a solution to this problem can be

traced back to a raffle I won during a reception at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association years ago. The victory entitled me to conduct a free survey of 1,000 respondents with the Internet survey company Polimetrix (now YouGov). The company was founded and run by Douglas Rivers, who had taught me introductory statistics and for whom I had later served as a teaching assistant. After talking with Doug about how exactly I would use my winnings, I came to realize that we had both been thinking about similar issues in the measurement of ideology. Doug generously offered to work together on a survey to investigate some of the questions we had both been asking, and the survey that resulted from this collaboration now serves as the first half of the data analyzed in this book.

Because of this and because of the huge impact he has had on my thinking about political science, statistics, and other areas, Doug deserves special thanks not only for his influence on this project, but for making it possible in the first place. Opportunities to learn from Doug in classes, in informal discussions, and through research collaborations have been some of the most valuable experiences of my academic career. Many other people also had a strong influence both on this project and on my scholarly development during my graduate training at Stanford University. Simon Jackman introduced me to many of the techniques I have applied to this project including latent traits modeling and Bayesian statistics and has offered useful advice on research and political science in general. Paul Sniderman also offered an important perspective on my work and has given me a great deal of valuable advice on being a scholar. Dave Brady and John Ferejohn, both individually and through the “pizza and politics” seminar series they ran, gave me some of my first introductions into what it meant to make the transition from reading political science to doing political science. Both Keith Krehbiel and Ken Shotts in the Graduate School of Business were instrumental in shaping my thinking about theory and theory testing in political science through their teaching, and both have given very helpful comments on this project.

I also benefited greatly from having such excellent graduate school colleagues. Talking with and learning from these people was one of the most valuable parts of my graduate education. Thanks go to Robert Anderson, John Bullock, Alex Kuo, Matt Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, Laura Miller, Alex Tahk, and many others.

Many individual scholars offered valuable feedback on earlier drafts of the book or on related projects. These include Paul Goren, Tim Groseclose, Jeff Lewis, Boris Shor, Walt Stone, Lynn Vavreck, and John Zaller.

Very special thanks go to Jim Adams, who has been unbelievably helpful and generous from the time when I started being put on conference panels with him as a graduate student through the completion of this project. This book is surely much better because of his comments and ideas (to say nothing of the foundational work he has done on testing theories of voting that has strongly influenced my thinking in this area). I also thank audiences at UC-Davis, UCLA, The University of North Texas, and Southern Methodist University for insightful comments.

My colleagues at the University of Texas have been tremendously helpful in nurturing my development as a scholar. Gary Freeman has been the best department chair anyone could ask for and has been extremely supportive of junior faculty, myself included. I have also received great feedback on both my research and on the book publishing process from Bethany Albertson, Zoltan Barany, Terry Chapman, Tse-min Lin, Eric McDaniel, Patrick McDonald, Scott Moser, Tasha Philpot, James Scott, Daron Shaw, Sean Theriault, Nick Valentino, and Kurt Weyland. I benefited greatly from receiving a College Research Fellowship during which I wrote much of the first draft of this book. I also received assistance from the College of Liberal Arts through a Special Funding Request that was used to pay for the second survey analyzed in this book and from a University of Texas at Austin Subvention Grant awarded by President William C. Powers, Jr., which provided support for the publication of this book. I also thank my editor Robert Dreesen for being amazingly helpful, thorough, and fast.

Finally, I thank my family for being incredibly supportive throughout my life including during my education and my wife Nalinda for always being there and for putting up with the many complications that graduate training, the academic job market, and the process of writing a book can bring about.

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 Political Ideology	14
3 Measuring Political Ideology	32
4 Linking Theory and Empirics: Testing Spatial Voting Theory	66
5 Partisanship versus Proximity: The Effect of Party Identification on Spatial Voting	103
6 Political Information and Spatial Voting	131
7 The Political Perceptions of Citizens	155
8 Conclusion	173
Appendix A Survey Question Wordings	185
Appendix B Survey Sample Characteristics	198
Appendix C Simplified Analyses of Ideology and Spatial Voting	204
Appendix D American National Election Studies Analyses	214
<i>Bibliography</i>	223
<i>Index</i>	231

## Introduction

The central feature of democracy is that the will of the people determines the policies enacted by the government. In representative democracies such as the United States, citizens influence the government primarily through voting in elections. The success of democratic governance, therefore, rests in large part on the ability of citizens to select leaders who will act in accordance with their policy preferences. In the end, a government lives up to this democratic ideal (or does not) through the enactment of specific policies. How, then, do citizens' votes relate to their preferences over government policy outputs? What intervening factors either assist or interfere with voters' selection of candidates who espouse views closest to their own? Understanding the relationship between citizens' policy views and their voting behavior is central to the evaluation of elections and of democratic governance more generally.

This book studies the opinions of ordinary citizens on specific policies and the relationships between those policy views and people's vote choices in presidential elections. Specifically, it focuses on testing the empirical implications of spatial theories of voting, which, in their simplest form, assume that each citizen's policy views can be represented by a location on some liberal-conservative policy spectrum, with each candidate in a given election each taking a position on this same dimension. Each voter then casts his or her ballot for the candidate whose position is closest to the voter's own ideological location.

The allure of such an approach is that it provides a model of decision making that is extremely simple and easy to work with: voters' choices are dictated solely by their ideological proximity to candidate positions. Furthermore, it is relatively straightforward to derive analytical results

about things such as the optimal positions that office-seeking candidates should take. As a consequence, spatial representations of elections and politics more generally have become ubiquitous in the modern political science literature. The simple spatial voting framework has spawned a multitude of theories, arguments, and more elaborate models (statistical as well as formal) to describe and account for voting behavior not only in elections but also within institutions such as Congress and the courts.

Despite the large impact that spatial theory has had across the discipline, however, there remains a strong, perhaps even pervasive, sentiment that ordinary voters do not possess the tools necessary to engage in anything resembling spatial voting. Political science therefore finds itself in a situation in which a huge body of theory and knowledge in the field is based, whether explicitly or implicitly, on some form of spatial voting theory – a theory of which many political scientists are fundamentally skeptical. This unfortunate situation calls out for some measure of resolution. Does spatial voting theory provide a reasonable account of the decision making of ordinary voters? Or does a significant portion of political science theory need to be revised or even abandoned because of the implausibility of its basic foundations?

The goal of this book is to resolve this tension by directly testing the observable implications of spatial voting theory. I accomplish this goal through a combination of novel survey design and statistical applications, which allows for the most direct estimates to date of the ideological positions of ordinary voters relative to the positions taken by candidates in presidential elections. The findings are, for the most part, encouraging. On average, the actual behavior of voters conforms quite closely to the predictions of spatial voting theory – much better, in fact, than most of the extant political behavior literature would seem to suggest. On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the basic spatial model can provide a more accurate account of voter behavior when modified to allow for the effects of other factors. Specifically, both party identification and political information exert strong moderating forces on voters' use of spatial decision making. These results suggest that spatial voting theory, particularly when modified to account for partisan and informational differences, provides a very accurate depiction of the behavior of voters in American elections. Perhaps more importantly, the results suggest a way in which the fundamental tension between some of the most prominent approaches to the study of voting can be reconciled or, at the least, compared in terms of their ability to explain the choices of voters in recent presidential elections.

Unlike most other work in this area, this book focuses on understanding the nature of ideology in the American public and the relationship between voters' ideological positions and their choices in elections. While much of the existing work on spatial voting deals with the theoretical consequences of assuming spatial decision making by voters, this book is centrally concerned with testing the microfoundations of these theories. Accordingly, I focus on testing, rather than assuming individual-level models of spatial voting, and on the policy views and vote choices of ordinary citizens rather than on the predicted behavior of strategic political parties or candidates for office. The work presented in this book also represents a key advance in the measurement of citizen ideology and of the comparison of the ideological positions taken by voters and candidates. While much of the existing work relies on either rough proxies for ideology or strong assumptions about the nature of people's perceptions or preferences (often going so far as to assume some variant of spatial voting or preferences in order to generate these estimates), the methods employed here produce direct estimates of the ideological positions of voters and candidates on the same scale without the need for heroic assumptions.

### The Political Behavior Tradition

In order to gain a full perspective on spatial voting theory, it is important to place it in the context of the field of voting behavior more broadly. Traditional approaches to the study of voting generally fall into what has been termed the *political behavior* research tradition.<sup>1</sup> This approach primarily emphasizes an attitude-driven model in which many factors work together to determine which candidate a citizen supports. The relevance of a given factor within the behavioral tradition is usually established by showing that it has a strong relationship with vote choice, either in terms of the magnitude of an effect or the amount of variance explained. The political behavior tradition has largely been characterized by different "schools" of study, each emphasizing the importance and centrality of one type of variable in affecting the political views and actions of ordinary citizens.

<sup>1</sup> The term "political behavior" also is used to refer to the study of the opinions and political actions of ordinary citizens. As such, it could be argued that spatial voting falls within the political behavior subfield. I use the term here, however, to refer to more traditional approaches to the study of public opinion, voting, and other topics.

The sociological approach, often referred to as the Columbia school of political behavior research, studies political actors primarily in terms of their social group memberships. Exemplified by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's (1954) classic study of voters in Elmira, New York, during the 1948 presidential campaign, this approach emphasizes how social groupings, such as race, religion, or union membership, affect people's political beliefs and decisions (see also Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). According to this view of politics, people typically associate with others who tend to be from similar economic, racial, and religious groups as themselves. As a consequence of this, the Columbia school argues that political views are strongly related to one's sociological characteristics.

Reaching prominence shortly after the sociological approach, the so-called Michigan school is arguably the best-known school of thought within political behavior. This approach emphasizes party identification as an "affective orientation" that powerfully shapes people's political beliefs and perceptions. Also sometimes called the "psychological approach," this school of thought is often identified with the classic text *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960). According to this school, party identification is a highly stable attitude that is developed through socialization, most strongly parental socialization. It is argued that these partisan loyalties profoundly affect how people perceive political stimuli and interact with the political world. This "affective orientation" toward the major political parties provides the primary basis by which voters decide how to cast their ballots. A central argument of many works in the Michigan school is that the vast majority of voters do not hold any sort of meaningful ideology, but instead have their political actions guided primarily by partisanship.

By contrast, theories of issue voting or policy voting, broadly construed, emphasize that the specific policy views held by citizens have an important impact on their vote choices. More forcefully, issue voting often argues that people's policy views are the main factor influencing their votes. Issue voting generally is confirmed by showing that voters' policy positions have some strong relationship with vote choice, in terms of either the magnitude of an effect or the amount of variance explained, and often after controlling for other factors such as partisanship, income, or other demographics.

Under the general umbrella of issue voting fall several different lines of argument, each posing a different mechanism for how issues affect voting. Single-issue voting (e.g., Levitin and Miller 1979; Hurley and Hill 1980; Conover et al. 1982; Erikson et al. 1993) argues that voters, or at least



some class of voters, decide which candidate to vote for based only on one particular issue. References to this sort of behavior are often found in journalistic accounts of elections and campaigns. For example, it is often said that “gun rights voters” or “pro-life voters” were key to a certain candidate’s victory, implying that there exist groups of voters whose choices were caused solely, or at least predominantly, by the candidates’ positions on one of these individual issues. Ideological voting, which can be seen as a special case of issue voting, states that people have policy-based political ideologies that affect vote choices. Ideological voting thus argues not only that voters have their choices shaped by policy views, but that these policy views are held together by a meaningful ideological structure rather than being a collection of separate, unrelated beliefs.

The political behavior tradition, as I have defined it here, has arguably served as the dominant paradigm for studying voting in elections for the better part of the past century.<sup>2</sup> While this general approach has clearly generated a wealth of important findings, its basic template often seems to be to put forth some variable *X* as a (perhaps *the*) central determinant of vote choice and to support this assertion by demonstrating a relationship between *X* and voter behavior in some regression model. To be fair, many of the works in the political behavior tradition, including some of the flagship works discussed previously, do much more than demonstrate a basic relationship between some variable and vote choice. Furthermore, several scholars specify and test general theoretical models of various political behaviors (see, e.g., Fiorina 1981; Zaller 1992; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Within the broader political behavior tradition, however, there remains some sense of skepticism of most attempts to understand vote choice or other political actions with simple, clear, formalized theory.

### Spatial Voting Theory

Spatial voting theory represents arguably the most direct and concise framework through which to study the choices made by voters in elections. Although the basic concepts behind spatial voting theory were first articulated by Hotelling (1929), the theory was most prominently

<sup>2</sup> This brief review of political behavior literature clearly omits many important works. The central objective of this discussion, however, has been to illustrate the basic approach in this tradition rather than to catalog the many important works falling under this broad umbrella. Accordingly, the works included have been chosen both for their centrality to the political behavior literature and for their relevance to later questions addressed in this book.