

# On Duverger and “Laws of Politics”

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## ABSTRACT

In “In Laws of Politics and How to Establish Them,” Erik Weber contends that my arguments for the existence of “five laws of politics” are “inconclusive.” Although the “empirical evidence is impressive,” he avers, the “underlying social mechanisms” responsible for the adduced relationships are missing. Without it, he adds, no empirical relationship rises to the special status of a “law” of politics. Helpfully, Weber did not stop there. Using the example of Duverger’s laws, he suggested ways to close the “argumentative gap.” In this article, I aim to do just that.

Weber (2022) contends that my arguments about the existence of “five laws of politics” (Cuzán 2015, 2019), although grounded in an “impressive” “evidence base,” are unconvincing. A key concept, the “intrinsic properties of politics and the state,” is undefined. More to the point, the adduced empirical relationships are not traced to “underlying social mechanisms” responsible for their operation. Without that knowledge, he submits, no stable pattern among variables of interest to a particular discipline rises to the “special status” of being called a law. However, Weber did not stop there. Helpfully, citing Duverger’s laws as an example, he proceeded to suggest how to close the “argumentative gap” (Weber 2022, 459–60). My purpose in this response is to do just that, thereby cementing the special status of the “five laws of politics.”

Weber (2022, 457) accepted 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 essential about politics and the state. Except, however, that those “intrinsic properties” were not specified. Moreover, the ontological and epistemological status of any alleged scientific law remains in doubt, he says, until two philosophical requirements are met. The empirical regularities (1) must be shown to be the outcome of “underlying mechanisms” of interacting parts or entities, and (2) must display “spatiotemporal stability.” In a social system, the entities of the mechanism consist of agents, persons, or “coordinated groups of individuals with common objectives” (Weber 2022, 458–59).

To illustrate an argument that meets these requirements, Weber (2022, 459–60) cited Duverger’s famous laws connecting what the French politologist called “the system of balloting” and “the system of parties” (Duverger 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. A case in point: the single-member, district-plurality system. Under this system, citizens become reluctant to waste their vote on parties that—although 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 to remain viable.<sup>1</sup>

As it happens, Duverger’s book includes the following elements constitutive of intrinsic properties of politics and the state:

[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 solution: the so-called compromise solutions lean one way or the other. This is equivalent to saying that the centre does not exist in politics: there may well be a Centre party but there is no centre tendency, no centre doctrine. 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. Every Centre is divided against itself and remains separated unto two halves, Left-Centre and Right-Centre. For the Centre is nothing more than the artificial grouping of the right wing of the Left and the left wing of the Right. 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. The dream of the Centre is to achieve a synthesis of contradictory aspirations; but synthesis is a power only of the mind. Action involves choice and politics involve action....There are no true Centres, only superimposed dualisms... (Duverger 1959, 215; spelling and capitalizations in the original; emphasis added).

According to Duverger, elections in a democracy present the electorate with two dualisms: a choice to vote or to abstain. The vote choice is to do so for the party in office (or one of its partners or allies in government) or for one in opposition. In 990 elections in developed and newer or less-developed democracies grouped under the respective labels of OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and non-OECD (see the appendix), the following relationships were observed. On average, about

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25% of the electorate stays home; of those who do show up at the polls, approximately 40% vote for the incumbents. These averages yield a support rate lower than one third, a fraction that regionally trends somewhat downward during the century of data under examination only in the OECD ( $\beta=-0.11$ ,  $R-Sq.=0.26$ ); thus, the “law of minority rule.” Duverger’s moderates decide the outcome of elections: thermostat-like, they lean one way in one election and the opposite way in another, depending on a number of factors. One is how far policy strays to the Right or the Left from the “geometric spot” (Budge 2019; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2009; Wlezien 1995, 2017). Chance also plays a part

scandals, and so on) and to mobilize their supporters.<sup>5</sup> For their part, the incumbents exploit state resources for partisan purposes, strategically manipulating levers of power and propaganda to pitch their case for another term—a case that becomes less likely to succeed the longer they remain in office (Heggen and Cuzán, 2022a). In summary, the interactions among voters and parties that take place within the rules operating in modern democratic states constitute the social mechanisms underlying the five laws of politics.

The laws also exert themselves in dictatorships, only under different manifestations. To survive, a regime must flex its coer-

### *These five laws together constitute an interwoven collection of electoral regularities.*

(Budge 2019; Heggen and Cuzán 2022a). Thus, the “law of electoral equipoise” or “alternation in office,” wherein parties of the Left (coded 1) and of the Right (coded -1) succeed each other in office with great regularity: the net ideological party score averages -0.19 and 0.12 in the OECD and non-OECD regions, respectively. This stable ideological balancing is the outcome of two other laws. The first is the “law of shrinking support,”<sup>2</sup> wherein incumbent vote falls, on average, from 2 to 3 percentage points per term in the developed democracies to two to three times that value in the non-OECD region, with no discernible time pattern in either case (Cuzán 2022b). The second is the “law of the 60% maximum.”<sup>3</sup> Incumbent vote exceeds 60% in less than 5% of all election outcomes, with most of the exceptions occurring in the newer democracies and with no variation across the century of data being examined. Adducing to the party “machines” in the United States, Duverger pointed out the “legal and illegal advantages” that “positions of power” bestow (1959, 147–48). Thus, with the proviso that these advantages—helpful if nothing else for staying in office—are available to a greater or lesser extent in all regimes, the “law of

cive arms to resist opposing currents and repress dissidents and potential rivals. It uses positive and negative incentives to elicit support, cooperation, or passive compliance from the population. Elections, if held at all, are manipulated to ensure the victory of the ruling party or coalition. These machinations reach absurd levels under a totalitarian party, which—making the most of the incumbent advantage—manufactures upwards of 90% turnout and an equal percentage of votes in its favor. However, the moment that such a dictatorship holds a more or less free election (as in many countries during the “Third Wave” of democratization of the 1990s), “as if pulled by an irresistible law of political gravity, like an avalanche incumbent vote plunges from its artificial highs” (Cuzán 2022a, 72).

In the foregoing, “the intrinsic properties of politics and the state” are implied. To make them explicit: the state is an entity, something like a machine,<sup>6</sup> whose governors—carriers of particular ideas, interests, and partisan and personal agendas—cooperate and clash with one another in the making and implementing of policies that are binding on the population. Never—or almost

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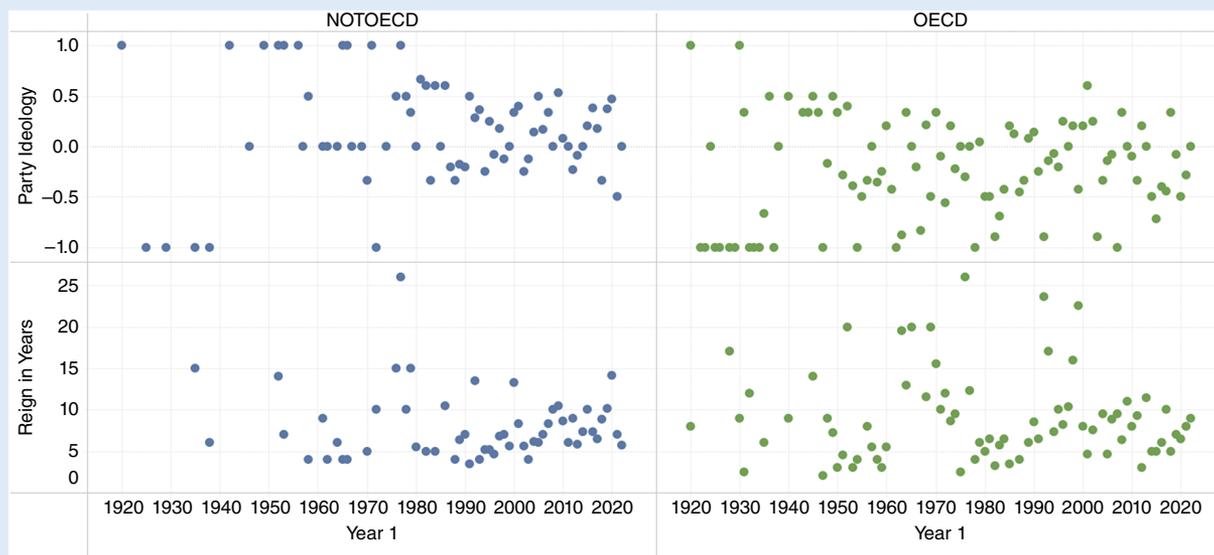
incumbent advantage.” In the developed democracies, incumbents win reelection more than half of the time and, when they do, they receive about 3 to 4 percentage points more than when the opposition drives them from office. Outside of the OECD, incumbents win reelection only half of the time, but the victory vote gap is twice as large. Neither gap shows any sign of narrowing.

These five laws together constitute an interwoven collection of electoral regularities.<sup>4</sup> They are clearly observable in democracies—regimes that feature enforceable political rights and civil liberties that enable the electorate to make the choices of which Duverger wrote. Drawing on information supplied from a plurality of sources, citizens choose among parties or leaders on offer during campaigns, or they stay home if they find no appealing options, believe that their vote makes no difference, or have no interest in politics. The “out” parties leverage freedoms of speech, press, and assembly to criticize the party in government on policy overreach and myriad other issues (economic conditions, crime, corruption,

never—is there unanimity about what is to be done, about ends or means. Competition or actual struggle for control of the decision making and coercive instruments of the machine is, in Duverger’s (1959) phrase, “in the nature of things.” A democratic regime constrains election winners in the exercise of state power, especially in its use against critics and rivals; allows a greater variety of inputs into policy making; and generates a more diverse political class. With two parties or multiparty “tendencies” on each side of the “geometric spot” setting goals and pushing and pulling the bureaucracy to implement them before they are ousted by a weary public (Budge 2019, 168 ff), a “political equilibrium”—perhaps what Duverger (1959, 424–25) had in mind—is maintained.

I conclude with two observations. The first is theoretical, specifying the scope of the five laws. They apply to all modern states—that is, to any national political entity (past, present, or future) whose governors claim the right to exercise sovereign

Figure 1  
Mean Regional Party Ideology and Reign by Year



The total includes 22 developed democracies (grouped under the OECD label), and 58 newer or less developed ones whether or not they are formal members of the international organization. For the list, see the Appendix. A reign is the length of a party spell in office, in years. Party ideology is coded 1 for Left or Center Left, 1 for Right or Center Right, and 0 for ambiguous, of which there are only a few.

authority, however it is acquired. The second observation is empirical. It demonstrates the spatiotemporal stability of what is arguably the signal characteristic of a democracy. That is, opposing parties or coalitions alternate in office about once per decade, netting a nearly neutral ideological score. As shown in figure 1, these statistics have remained constant for as long as a century in each region.

Having offered, in response to Weber and consistent with Duverger's theorizing, a plausible mechanism for expecting the electoral patterns summarized in the five laws to persist indefinitely, I submit that the burden of argumentation now shifts to those who would question that they will continue to hold. Given the "intrinsic properties of politics and the state" argued here, what reasons are there for doubting that these spatiotemporal patterns will project into the future?<sup>7</sup>

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#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OKEKRX>. ■

#### NOTES

1. However, see Colomer (2005) for empirical evidence supporting a logical model that reverses the arrow of causality.
2. This is my infelicitous phrase to describe what Nannestad and Paldam (1999) called in their classic article "the cost of ruling." To learn why the phrase is not suitable, see Heggen and Cuzán (2022b).
3. Incidentally, it is the "law of the 60% maximum" (not the "law of partials," as Weber stated) that marks the boundary between democracies and dictatorships that held counterfeit "elections" (e.g., in the now almost-extinct communist regimes).
4. Budge (2019, 240) considered them "a unified body of knowledge."
5. Coppedge (2012, 27–28) noted that "regimes that permit free expression also have laws to protect diverse media" and "both indicators can be treated as measuring the same underlying dimension [of democracy], contestation."
6. Cartwright (1999, 325) wrote of a country's "socioeconomic machine" that generates "causal relations" and "probability measures appropriate for the quantities appearing in these relations." Elsewhere, she stated that these "social, economic, and cultural arrangements" "generate law-like (*ceteris paribus*) regularities" (Cartwright 2020, 275; see also Ashby 1960). I thank the anonymous reviewer who called my attention to Cartwright's work.
7. An anonymous reviewer raised the criterion of "projectability," likening it to the principle of spatiotemporal stability. This is related to the problem of induction, which philosophers have wrestled with at least since Hume. True, just because something happened in the past, it is no guarantee that it will recur in the future. As Budge (2019, 321) stated, "induction cannot tell you for certain that things will go on as they are, since in itself it has no explanation of why they should do so. Its implicit assumption is simply that what happens today will go on happening tomorrow." Thus, Weber's requirement is that any proponent of a scientific law must identify its operating mechanism.

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APPENDIX

Appendix: Number of Elections by Country, 1920–2022

Country	OECD	Non-OECD
Albania		8
Argentina		8
Australia	35	
Austria	22	
Bahamas		10
Barbados		15
Belgium	22	
Belize		9
Benin		6
Bermuda		12
Bolivia		10
Botswana		11
Brazil		7
Bulgaria		10
Canada	29	
Cape Verde		7
Chile		13
Colombia		12
Costa Rica		17
Czech Republic		7
Czechoslovakia		4
Denmark	28	
Dominican Republic		14
Ecuador		10
El Salvador		7
Estonia		7
France	10	
Germany	19	
Ghana		7
Greece	22	
Grenada		8
Guatemala		6
Guyana		6

(Continued)

Appendix: Number of Elections by Country, 1920–2022

Country	OECD	Non-OECD
Honduras		11
Hungary		7
Iceland	23	
India		16
Indonesia		4
Ireland	26	
Israel	23	
Italy	18	
Jamaica		13
Japan	26	
Latvia		9
Lesotho		5
Lithuania		6
Luxembourg	16	
Macedonia		8
Madagascar		6
Malawi		7
Mauritius		8
Mexico		6
Moldova		6
Mongolia		8
Namibia		6
Netherlands	23	
New Zealand	33	
Norway	20	
Panama		6
Paraguay		6
Peru		2
Philippines		11
Poland		7
Portugal	15	
Sao Tome and Principe		6

(Continued)

**Appendix: Number of Elections by Country, 1920–2022**

<b>Country</b>	<b>OECD</b>	<b>Non-OECD</b>
Senegal		8
Seychelles		7
Sierra Leone		4
Slovakia		8
Slovenia		10
South Korea		7
Spain	14	
St. Lucia		11
St. Vincent and the Grenadines		10
Sweden	26	
Taiwan		7
Trinidad–Tobago		14
United Kingdom	26	
Uruguay		7
United States of America	26	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>502</b>

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