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# Should We Go Abroad? The Strategic Entry of Ecuadorian Political Parties in Overseas Electoral Districts

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## ABSTRACT

The literature on external voting overlooks why some political parties campaign abroad while others remain focused on the national territory. This article investigates the determinants of the strategic entry of political parties in overseas districts through analysing legislative elections in Ecuador (2007–2017). Based on a study of the incentives and constraints of political party presence abroad, we find that parties are more likely to compete for elections in overseas districts displaying a weaker party competition as well as when they account for previous electoral experience in these districts.

## KEYWORDS

Political parties abroad; party competition; external voting; overseas districts; Ecuador

## Introduction

Although external voting rights usually demonstrate a relatively low impact on homeland politics, the political engagement of non-resident citizens can drive political parties to campaign and create branches abroad, as well as recruit party members and activists in overseas districts (Burgess, 2018; Levitt & De la Dehesa, 2003; Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2019b; Portes, Escobar, & Radford, 2007). In New Zealand, for instance, the Green Party launched an online campaign ‘Hey Kiwi’ to attract support from New Zealanders living abroad in the 2011 elections (Gamlen, 2015). Likewise, the democratic-liberal and liberal parties in Romania have been favoured by diaspora voting since the 2009 presidential elections (Burean, 2011).

Bearing in mind ever-increasing human mobility, scholars have examined a set of explanatory factors to reveal why countries enact, regulate and apply emigrant enfranchisement (e.g. Palop-García & Pedroza, 2019; Rhodes & Harutyunyan, 2010; Turcu & Urbatsch, 2015; Umpierrez de Reguero, Yener-Roderburg, & Cartagena, 2021; Wellman, 2020). Similarly, existing literature has delved in the political consequences of external voting on homeland politics (e.g. Bauböck, 2006; Collyer, 2014b; Lafleur,

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2013). These contributions have come mainly from the field of migration studies. Research on party politics has traditionally focused on the national arena, overlooking other spaces of party competition, such as the transnational arena (similar claims have been made by, e.g. Burgess & Tyburski, 2020; Jakobson, Saarts, & Kaley, 2020; Kernalegenn & van Haute, 2020), despite a subset of countries with overseas districts that allow parties to selectively compete in them. In this context, our research question deals with political parties' strategic entry in overseas districts,<sup>1</sup> and more precisely on the reasons why do some parties compete to capture overseas votes, while others remain focussed on the national territory.

To answer this question, we analyse the electoral performance and political trajectory of political parties in overseas districts. Following Gamlen's (2015) contribution, the main assumption of this article relies on the *feedback effect*, i.e. the perceived importance of external voting rights for parties to engage overseas voters. Political parties are particularly careful when referring to overseas districts, given their high campaigning cost, geographical distance, incomplete information and specific characteristics of emigration waves (Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2019b; Turcu & Urbatsch, 2020; van Haute & Kernalegenn, 2020). Different groups of individuals in a given district (whether inside or outside national borders) have different preferences and vary in their electoral behaviour patterns (see Peltoniemi, 2016b; Potter & Olivella, 2015; Wellman, 2020). Consequently, we expect that if the electoral rules do not constrain them, parties will vary in their pattern of electoral competition when formulating strategies to obtain overseas voters, as compared to inland electoral districts.

In this article, we evaluate this argument by analysing the case of Ecuador. This country is characterised by state-led transnationalism, using an electoral system based on proportional representation, including three two-seats overseas districts. It has a highly-fragmented party system. The enfranchisement of Ecuadorians living abroad was promulgated in 1998 and implemented for the first time in 2006 in presidential elections. Since then, non-resident Ecuadorians have gone 11 times to voting booths to participate in six different types of elections, including direct democracy tools. Overall, Ecuador is the leading example of transnational party competition in Latin America and the Caribbean via materialising political offices abroad, campaigning abroad and recruiting (non-resident citizen) party members (Pedroza & Palop-García, 2017). By employing a dataset based on all Ecuadorian parties that compete in overseas districts, we focus on the factors explaining transnational party competition.

In what follows, we briefly review prior analyses of parties' strategic entry in overseas electoral districts. This theoretical discussion helps us formulate our hypotheses. In the third section, we present the data and method of analysis. In the fourth section, we descriptively analyse the dependent and independent variables, as well as discuss our regression models. We conclude with a novel proposal to measure the feedback effect in overseas districts. Our study contributes to the existing literature (e.g. Gamlen, 2015) that, until now, has lacked aggregate data to create an inferential model of political trajectories and parties' electoral performance in the transnational arena, including in what Collyer (2014a) has coined as a 'vote abroad for direct representation'.<sup>2</sup>

## Theory and Hypotheses

In many countries, political parties can choose to participate in elections at two different levels: nationwide or district-based (or both). Often, parties do not compete in all districts in a given election but rather selectively enter a subset of districts for different reasons, given limited resources, new electoral niches or broader patterns of electoral competition (Blais, Lachat, Hino, & Doray-Demers, 2011; Morgenstern & Vasquez-D'Elia, 2007). Accordingly, a growing number of contributions seek to explain parties' decisions, particularly their strategic electoral entry from a district, rather than national, perspective (e.g. Burgess, 2018; Kernalegenn & van Haute, 2020; Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2019b; Potter & Olivella, 2015; Selb & Pituctin, 2010). Some accounts have suggested a blend of explanatory factors that drive some parties to be present nationwide, while others only participate in a subset of electoral districts (Cox, 1997; Duverger, 1954/2001; Taagepera & Shugart, 1993). This is the case for full emigrant parties (FEP) in Ecuador (Umpierrez de Reguero & Dandoy, 2020), the Philippines (Burgess, 2018) and Italy (van Haute & Kernalegenn, 2020). Created from abroad by groups of emigrants, these FEP often compete in national politics by participating in elections only in one or more overseas districts.

For Collyer (2014a), three types of electoral systems exist in which a country can apply emigrant enfranchisement: (1) *vote in the home district*, or the provision where non-resident citizens return to their home country on election day to exercise suffrage rights (e.g. Israel and Uruguay), otherwise they cannot vote; (2) *vote abroad for the home district*, where votes are casted abroad but counted among the total pool of votes in the last district of residence prior to emigration (e.g. Turkey and Spain) or by default in the main district in the home country (e.g. Warsaw in Poland); and (3) *vote abroad for direct representation*, in which emigrants cannot only vote but may also stand as candidates in an overseas district. Although voting for the home district is frequently discarded given the spatial limitations, some scholars take this provision into account (e.g. Hutcheson & Arrighi, 2015). With this system of voting abroad for direct representation, political parties can compete to win between one (in Colombia) and 18 overseas seats (in Tunisia) (Collyer, 2014b). Correspondingly, this provision offers greater incentives for party competition, even in cases with general representation of emigrants (e.g. Peru).

In the case of voting abroad for a home district within an electoral system of proportional representation, overseas votes can increase the overall (national) vote share of any party competing. In a plurality-majority system, overseas votes only serve for the winning party in that given district (Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2019b). As such, overseas districts can have a larger impact in proportional representation settings. To some extent, the provision of the vote abroad for direct representation is analogous to a candidate-based FPTP system where the winner takes all in each district – except in Italy, which has a proportional design for external voting (Collyer, 2014b). However, and independent from the chosen electoral system, voting abroad for direct representation is different than the other types of external voting provisions since it provides additional incentives for political parties to compete.

The literature on political competition incorporates another set of factors that explain political parties' decisions to participate in elections. Parties could perceive an incentive to increase activities in districts where the election result is expected to be close (Blais,

2000; Geys, 2006). These incentives are further remarkable in elections when the aggregate homeland result is subject to change by the influence of overseas votes, such as when only a few seats have the potential to disrupt the equilibrium between mainstream and emergent parties in terms of coalitions formation (Gamlen, 2015).

The capacity to swing the overall results or alter the coalition formation bargaining is more likely to occur when the size of the overseas districts is proportionally smaller than other electoral districts within the home country. In Ecuador, for instance, the 152,180 non-resident Ecuadorians registered to vote in the 2007 elections represented only 1.6% of the total electorate but were granted no less than 4.6% of the seats. Logically, it takes fewer votes for a party to win seats in the overseas districts than in the home districts. This is further exacerbated by the fact that turnout is generally much lower in overseas districts as compared to home districts (Lafleur, 2013), especially in countries where voting is compulsory in inland electoral districts but facultative abroad, such as in Ecuador. In 2007, turnout was 26.1% abroad versus 74% in home districts. As a result, the 39,698 overseas voters that turned out represented 0.58% of the total electorate, yet occupied 4.6% of the seats in the National Assembly of Ecuador (Ramírez & Umpierrez de Reguero, 2019). Thereby, the institutional features of external voting, such as the district magnitude and the size of the district, represent important aspects in parties' strategic calculus.

Our first set of hypotheses concerns the patterns of party competition. The decision to participate in an election often results from a cost–benefit calculation. Similar to the argument regarding the capacity of swinging electoral results, a political party might decide to partake in elections only in cases where the probability of gaining a seat is not equal to zero. This decision might be affected by the number of parties participating in the elections in the electoral district: the larger the number of parties, the lower the incentive to participate in the election. But a small number of parties competing in a given election does not necessarily mean that it is easier to win a seat in this district. Frequently, low party competition is explained by the fact that one party (often the incumbent) dominates the electoral district. Consequently, we expect that: (H1<sub>a</sub>) *parties are more likely to compete in overseas districts that display low party competition*, combined with the expectation that (H1<sub>b</sub>) *parties are more likely to compete in overseas districts where there is no dominant party*.

Previous electoral success often triggers incentives for parties to participate in elections in a given electoral district. Obtaining a seat, or being close to winning the elections, are two of the significant pathways to improve a party's media coverage and visibility among the electorate (Potter & Olivella, 2015). Similarly, parties look at their electoral performance in previous elections in the same district as a proxy to calculate their probabilities of electoral success; thereafter, they use the probabilities to decide to participate, or not. Following these arguments, we expect that: (H2) *political parties with previous electoral experience in overseas districts are more likely to compete in overseas districts*.

The third hypothesis concerns the characteristics of the overseas districts. Electoral districts are seldom perfectly equal and might display different socio-demographics. In this regard, size (in terms of number of population or registered voters) is probably the most important district-related factor that might affect a party's decision to

compete in elections. Following our arguments above, and given district magnitude remains constant across districts, it may be easier to win seats in a district with a small population of voters. We therefore expect that: (H3<sub>a</sub>) *political parties are more likely to compete in smaller overseas districts.*

Compared to home districts, overseas districts often cut across international borders and a district rarely fits perfectly into an existent country (since migrants are unequally distributed across countries). Overseas districts tend to cover groups of migrants living in different countries or even on different continents. It seems *de facto* more difficult for a party to mobilise voters and campaign staff in an electoral district distributed over 20 different countries, as compared to a district limited to the migrant population of only one country. As a result, we expect that: (H3<sub>b</sub>) *political parties are more likely to compete in overseas districts that cover few countries.*

Party ideology may also have an impact on a party's decision to compete in overseas districts. In Europe, MPs pay special attention to emigrant-related issues, not only when their party captures overseas votes, but also when election results among non-resident citizens had been close in previous elections (Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2019a). Likewise, emigrant-related issues are prominent in Latin American legislatures that apply emigrant special representation, such as Colombia and Ecuador, suggesting that the impact of emigrant-reserved seats significantly correlates with the overseas district size (Palop-García, 2018).

Political parties can support external voting rights in parliamentary debates and they may include it in their ideology and political campaigns (Burgess, 2018; Paarlberg, 2019). Parties' positions on emigrant-related issues might be a determinant for a political party to compete in overseas districts. The way they mention these issues, as well as the way they stand for non-resident citizens in parliament, can equate to (dis)engagement with the emigrant electorate niche. If a party advocates migrant enfranchisement in parliament, whether non-resident citizens' or foreign residents' voting rights, these groups will be more likely to vote in the upcoming elections for that party (see the Enfranchisement-Gratitude Model in Turcu & Urbatsch, 2020). If a party explicitly includes emigrant-related issues in its party manifestos, it is indirectly inviting non-resident citizens to vote for it and even join as party members and activists. Otherwise, if the party does not mention emigrant-related issues or portrays a negative perception of migrants, it means that the party is uninterested in capturing overseas votes. Accordingly, we expect that: (H4<sub>a</sub>) *parties displaying an ideology favourable to emigrants are more likely to compete in overseas districts.*

Prior contributions suggest that party position on the left-right scale is significantly associated with emigrant-related issues. According to Østergaard-Nielsen, Ciornei, and Lafleur (2019), moderate right-wing parties are more likely to support external voting rights in Europe. In Latin America, party ideology tends to behave differently. Although right-leaning 'strongmen' led migrant enfranchisement processes prior to the 1990s, over the last three decades left-wing parties have extended voting rights to non-resident nationals and noncitizen residents (Escobar, 2015; Finn, 2020), mostly by combining the promotion of electoral participation with populism. In this way, we expect that: (H4b) *left-wing parties are more likely to compete in overseas districts.*

## Ecuadorian Elections, Data and Variables

In order to evaluate the presence of political parties in Ecuadorian overseas districts, we build a dataset that comprises all four legislative elections, where non-resident Ecuadorians could vote: the 2007 Constituent Assembly elections and the elections of 2009, 2013 and 2017 at both district-based and nationwide levels.

Data is collected at the party level, clustered in each of the three overseas electoral districts. Overseas districts are divided based on geographic groups of countries: (1) Europe, Asia and Oceania; (2) Canada and the United States; and (3) Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. Each district sends two representatives to the National Assembly, independent from the number of registered voters in the district.

Even though there have been few changes in the Ecuadorian electoral system regarding the external voting since 2007<sup>3</sup> (Umpierrez de Reguero & Dandoy, 2020), we assume that it did not affect parties' decisions to participate in elections. Except for the formula for the conversion of votes into seats, the core elements of the Ecuadorian electoral system for external voting – proportional representation, district magnitude, ballot structure and candidacy rights – remained the same over this period.

Emigrant representatives are elected for four-year terms (for a maximum of two terms in the same type of seat) based on a proportional electoral system with open lists, allowing *panachage* (voters can select two candidates belonging to two different party lists). Given the low district magnitude of just two seats and the absence of substitute candidates, party lists are composed of only two candidates in each district. Similar to inland districts, the number of seats defines the maximum number of candidates per party list. Independent candidates are not allowed. Since there are two seats in each of the three overseas districts, a voter should select two candidates on the ballot, no matter if they belong to the same party list or from two different parties. Likewise, the order of the candidates is unimportant and voters can select two candidates on the first row of the ballot, two candidates on the second row, or one on the first and another on the second.

The first task in the database construction is establishing the political parties' list. Since we want to explain why some parties participate in legislative elections in overseas districts while others choose not to enlist candidates for these elections, we cannot rely on official party registration information. Consequently, in our database we include all political parties that presented candidates in a given election at the national level and all parties that presented candidates in a previous election in at least one overseas district (given the party still exists). Altogether, we end up with 485 observations, which is the number of parties that could have participated in elections in one of the three overseas districts.

The dependent variable is based on the presence or absence of the political party on the electoral ballot in an overseas district. Parties can decide to participate in legislative elections in all overseas districts, in only one (or two) district or not to participate in the legislative elections at all. We use the official registration documents from the National Electoral Commission of Ecuador (CNE) in order to enlist all the political parties and coalitions that competed in these elections and/or in the previous one and we compare these observations with data on the party presence in home districts. The dependent variable is therefore a binary measure that assesses whether the party

participates in the legislative elections in a given election year and in a given overseas district: (1) if the party decided to compete in the election and (0) if the party does not partake in the election. Table 1 shows that only 27.22% of all Ecuadorians political parties participated in at least one of the given overseas districts. In other words, it means that more than three-fourths of all Ecuadorian parties that competed in the legislative elections in home districts decided not to present candidates in the overseas districts. In Ecuador, party organisations are free to compete in the number of districts they want to, in the country, abroad or both.

A clear example lies in the case of the Social Christian Party (*Partido Social Cristiano*, PSC), one of the main Ecuadorian parties. In the 2007 and 2009 legislative elections, the PSC decided to present candidates in two out of three overseas districts, but not in the Latin America, Caribbean and Africa district. In 2007, the PSC even managed to obtain the second largest vote share in the two overseas districts where it competed and it is likely that the party could have received a decent amount of votes in the third district. The fact that many established parties like the PSC decide not to compete in some electoral districts is very surprising, as the logistical cost for participating in the overseas districts is rather low: there is almost no administrative burden as the party is already registered with the CNE at the national level and, given the small district magnitude, needs to find ‘only’ two candidates to fully participate in these elections. Still, campaigning abroad means higher costs to political parties, compared to other small electoral districts within the country, given the geographical distance of overseas districts and the additional constraints created by the residence country (Lafleur, 2013; Peltoniemi, 2016a).

Table 1 illustrates an important within-variation in the presence of Ecuadorian party organisations in overseas districts. Given the highly unstable party system in Ecuador, the number of political parties registered in the legislative elections varies significantly over time as does, by definition, the number of parties presenting candidates in the overseas districts. The lowest shares of parties participating in elections in overseas districts happened in the 2007 and 2009 elections. In 2013 and 2017, the party system underwent radical changes due to the domination of the ruling party *Movimiento Patria Activa I Soberana* (MPAIS). For both election years, the effective number of legislative parties was the lowest since the countries’ first elections in 1979. It reached the score of 1.83 effective parties in 2013, compared to a score of 7.54 in 2002 (Freidenberg & Pachano, 2016). Even if a majority of parties competed in the 2013 and 2017 elections in the overseas districts, a significant number of registered parties decided not to present candidates in these districts.

What could therefore explain this low share of political parties participating in the elections in the overseas district? In Section 2, we identified four main hypotheses that

**Table 1.** Party participation in Ecuadorian elections per overseas district (2007–2017).

| Overseas district                       | 2007<br>(N = 207) | 2009<br>(N = 182) | 2013<br>(N = 48) | 2017<br>(N = 48) | All<br>(N = 485) |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Europe, Asia and Oceania                | 21.74%            | 18.03%            | 75.00%           | 62.50%           | 29.63%           |
| Canada and the United States            | 26.09%            | 16.13%            | 68.75%           | 56.25%           | 29.45%           |
| Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa | 15.94%            | 10.17%            | 50.00%           | 68.75%           | 22.50%           |
| All                                     | 21.28%            | 14.84%            | 64.58%           | 62.50%           | 27.22%           |

Note: The percentage consists in the number of parties competing in each overseas district divided by the total number of parties.

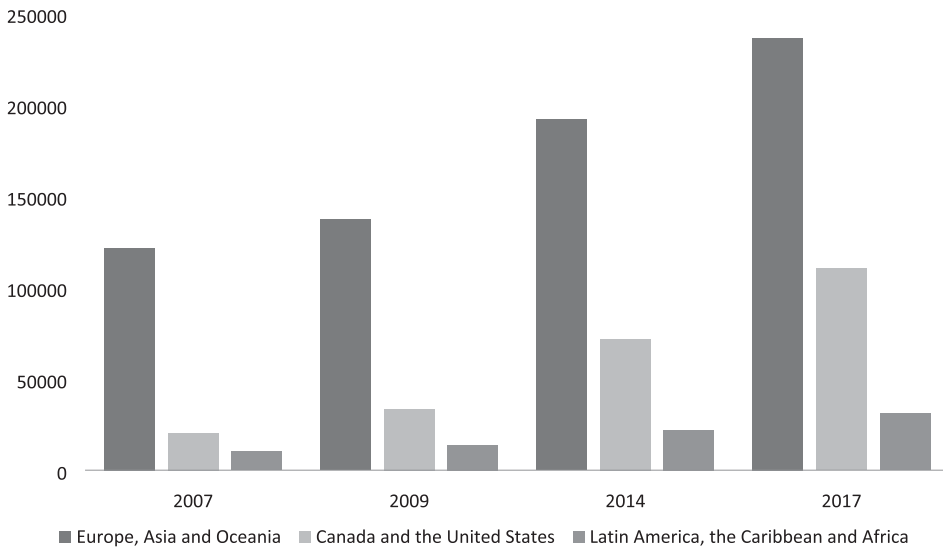
will be tested in our models. A set of independent variables is derived from each hypothesis.

Given the instability of the Ecuadorian party system, our first independent variable concerns patterns of party competition in previous elections. We expect that parties would have incentives to participate in elections if competition is low. A first variable concerns the effective number of political parties competing in the overseas district (H1<sub>a</sub>) based on vote shares in the previous elections. Since 2007 marked the first legislative elections when Ecuadorians living abroad could vote, there is no prior point of comparison. As a proxy for party competition in these elections, we used the effective number of parties in the first round of the 2006 presidential elections in each of the three overseas districts. Electoral alliances are counted as one single party, independent from the number of political organisations in the alliance. An average of 3.5 parties participated in legislative elections in each overseas district.

MPAIS participated in all legislative elections in all overseas districts. The party finished as the largest party in all three districts and its results varied between 33.7% and 68.1% of the votes. Consequently, this dominant party won all seats in overseas districts for all four legislative elections, with three exceptions: one seat in the Latin America, Caribbean and Africa district in 2009 (which was won by the electoral alliance of *Partido Renovación Institucional Acción Nacional*, PRIAN, together with the *FEP Movimiento Hermandad Ecuatoriana*, MHE) and one seat in the same district and in the Canada and United States district in 2017 (both seats taken by the *Movimiento Creando Oportunidades*, CREO). We therefore included a variable measuring the party vote shares of MPAIS in each overseas district in the previous legislative elections and in the first round of the 2006 presidential elections as a proxy for party competition in the 2007 legislative elections. The reasoning behind this variable is that the strength of MPAIS may daunt other parties to participate in elections (H1<sub>b</sub>).

The second set of independent variables is derived from the previous electoral trajectory of a political party in each overseas district in order to operationalise its electoral experience. There are two main types of seats in the Ecuadorian Assembly: 'national seats' that are elected based on a nationwide district and 'district-based seats' elected based on a smaller territorial unit. Overseas districts belong to the second type of seats, together with provincial and sub-provincial districts. As a result, Ecuadorians living abroad – similar to other Ecuadorians voters – face two ballots for the unicameral legislative elections in the voting booth: one for the national seats<sup>4</sup> and the other for the two district-based (overseas) seats. We thus included one variable that measures the participation of the party in the previous elections in the overseas district for both district-based and national seats. This variable takes the value of '0' when the party did not participate in the previous elections in the district, '1' when it participated for one of the two seat types or '2' when the party participated in both election types. As a proxy for the 2007 elections, we used party participation in the 2006 presidential elections.

The third set of explanatory variables concern the characteristics of the overseas districts, particularly their size and distribution. Given the fact that they are based on geographical criteria, the three districts are unbalanced in demographic terms. Only 31,096 voters were registered in the Latin America, Caribbean and Africa district for the 2017 elections, while 236,637 voters were in the Europe, Asia and Oceania district in the same year. That is about 7.5 times more voters. Size matters since it may be easier to



**Figure 1.** Number of registered voter per overseas district (2007–2017).

win a seat in an electoral district composed of a small number of voters, as it facilitates the campaign and individual contact with voters. We operationalise this district size variable by measuring the natural logarithm of the number of registered voters per overseas district ( $H3_a$ ). Overall, the number of registered Ecuadorian voters living abroad increased over time (Figure 1).

But the impact of the size of the electoral district might be mitigated by the distribution of voters within the district. Concerning overseas districts, voters can be spread across a large number of countries or even continents. As we mentioned above, campaigning costs increase for parties and candidates by the number of different countries and territories involved. Our second variable regarding the overseas districts characteristics concerns the number of countries composing each of the three Ecuadorian electoral districts ( $H3_b$ ). It varies from two (in the Canada and the United States district) to 25 residence countries in 2013 for the voters in the Europe, Asia and Oceania district. The number of residence countries slightly fluctuates over time, as more voters from different countries tend to be integrated in the most recent legislative elections. As an alternative way to measure the distribution of voters, our models also consider the number of polling stations per overseas district. Both the number of countries and number of polling stations are slightly correlated ( $r = 0.303$ ).

Our fourth set of independent variables concerns party ideology. Data on Ecuadorian parties are seldom found in comparative international datasets. The country is absent from projects that aim at measuring party positions, such as the MARPOR-CMP-MRG project, the Chapel Hill expert survey, and the Global Party Survey (Norris, 2020). Latin American Political Parties (Alcántara, 2001) only include a handful of Ecuadorian parties. Moreover, no official information exists on ideology of parties registered with the CNE and parties' self-positioning is not a reliable measurement. In this article, we rely on the few analyses of party positions in international projects and on secondary literature (e.g. Basabe-Serrano, 2018; Moncagatta & Espinosa, 2019; Norris, 2020), as well as our own analysis

of available party manifestos to assess parties' ideological positioning on the left-right scale and on policies designed for emigrants. Our database contains many missing values for party positions on migration, especially for older and smaller parties.

Concerning the variable measuring the importance of Ecuadorians living abroad for party ideology, we coded a dummy variable and drew on our analysis of party manifestos (H4<sub>a</sub>). We coded the variable as '1' if the party manifesto paid attention to emigrants, emigration policies or any emigrant-related issue; we indicated '0' otherwise.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, all parties that were only registered for participating in one or more districts abroad allocated the majority of their manifesto content to emigration. It is important to mention that, contrary to the normal procedures of comparative projects on party ideology, we are measuring emigration instead of immigration. We relied on existing databases and secondary literature to identify if the party or electoral coalition is left-, centre- or right-leaning (H4<sub>b</sub>). This is a rather raw measure but the volatility of the Ecuadorian party system and the fluctuating party positions on important socioeconomic and societal issues render a more detailed positioning impossible on the left-right scale. In our database, 219 parties were coded as left-wing, 116 as centre parties, and 150 as right-wing.

We also integrated several control variables in our models. First, we added a dummy variable for electoral alliances. Electoral alliances between two or more national and district-based parties are frequent in Ecuador and significantly impact election results (Dandroy, 2017, 2019). Alliances might ease the party strategies in presenting candidates in overseas districts, along with the fact that they may affect the ideology of the alliance both in terms of the importance of emigration issues and of left-right positioning. We also added a dummy variable for the FEP that are registered to participate in elections only in one of more overseas districts. 72 observations in our database correspond to FEP. We finally control for voter turnout that might mitigate the impact of overseas district size on the decision to participate in elections, and we integrated a dummy for the first election year of 2007.<sup>6</sup>

## Results

Given the structure of our data (parties are clustered in districts and in election years) and the fact that the dependent variable is binary, we ran a series of multilevel mixed-effects probit regressions. Table 2 displays the results of the model testing for the four hypotheses, including control variables, for the total number of cases ( $N = 485$ ). Our models are statistically significant, given the  $p$ -value is less than 0.001. These models allow us to appreciate the structure of constraints and incentives that party competition generates within and outside Ecuador. Few variables are significant, and we must reject two of our hypotheses. Nonetheless, we highlight relevant elements based on the regression models.

Our models confirm the importance of party competition in explaining the party decision to compete in an overseas electoral district (Hypothesis 1). We approached party competition based on two different variables and both are negative and significant in our models. Ecuadorian parties decide not to compete in an electoral district abroad when the effective number of parties in previous elections in the same district is high. Similarly, the dominance of MPAIS seems to function as a deterrence force, as parties tend not to compete in overseas districts where MPAIS registered a large share of

**Table 2.** Explaining party presence in Ecuadorian overseas districts (2007–2017).

|                             | Model 1<br>Without emigrant-related issues | Model 2<br>With emigrant-related issues |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Party Competition           | –1.635***<br>(0.411)                       | –0.836*<br>(0.459)                      |
| MPAIS vote shares           | –0.149***<br>(0.054)                       | –0.092<br>(0.059)                       |
| Previous elections          | 0.811***<br>(0.113)                        | 0.472***<br>(0.154)                     |
| District size               | 0.574<br>(0.603)                           | –0.088<br>(0.703)                       |
| Number of countries         | 0.023<br>(0.021)                           | 0.013<br>(0.026)                        |
| Emigrant-related issues     | –  | 0.284<br>(0.257)                        |
| Centre party                | –0.199<br>(0.249)                          | –0.074<br>(0.354)                       |
| Right-wing party            | 0.032<br>(0.165)                           | 0.176<br>(0.259)                        |
| Alliance                    | –0.037<br>(0.186)                          | 0.102<br>(0.245)                        |
| Full emigrant party         | 0.220<br>(0.247)                           | –1.132***<br>(0.359)                    |
| Turnout                     | –0.029<br>(0.033)                          | –0.038<br>(0.039)                       |
| First elections             | –2.485**<br>(1.247)                        | –1.383<br>(1.394)                       |
| var(_cons[Year])            | 0.000<br>(0.000)                           | 0.000<br>(0.000)                        |
| var(_cons[Year > District]) | 0.000<br>(0.000)                           | 0.000<br>(0.000)                        |
| Constant                    | 10.790*<br>(6.535)                         | 9.034<br>(7.410)                        |
| Observations                | 485  | 219                                     |
| Number of groups (Year)     | 4  | 4                                       |
| Number of groups (District) | 12   | 12                                      |
| Log likelihood              | –211.413                                   | –113.922                                |
| Wald chi2(11)               | 109.20                                     | 61.19                                   |
| Prob > chi2                 | 0.000                                      | 0.000                                   |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ . Left-wing party as reference category.

votes in previous elections in the same district. Both variables indicate that parties tend to believe that their chances of obtaining one of the two seats in the overseas district is (too) small and that it is better not to participate in these elections at all.<sup>7</sup>

The variable measuring previous electoral participation in the overseas districts – whether in the ‘district-based seats’ and/or in the ‘national seats’ – has a significant and positive impact on the parties’ decision to participate in elections in the overseas districts, confirming Hypothesis 2. Owing to experience in the overseas districts, parties can rely on existing tools, platforms and networks of voters that they had mobilised in previous elections. In that sense, there is path dependency regarding electoral participation, independent from the success or defeat that such parties recorded. This decision to run once again in overseas districts may also be triggered by the candidates themselves. If the party can count on two serious and motivated candidates who already have campaign experience and can guarantee a decent electoral result at a small cost, it seems logical that a party decides to partake in these elections again.

But our variable of electoral experience in overseas districts concerns both types of seats. We ran an alternative model where we disaggregated the previous electoral

participation and distinguished between the two types of seats, i.e. the district-based and national seats (see Table A1 in the Appendix). Results remain almost exactly the same concerning the other independent variables (both variables of party competition and the 2007 election dummy remain significant) and indicate that both previous experiences in presenting candidates for the ‘district-based seats’ and in the ‘national seats’ in a given overseas district positively impact the decision to participate in the elections in the district. Finally, the dummy variable for the year of the first overseas elections is significant and negative, indicating that parties were in general cautious to participate in elections abroad. The other control variables (including turnout, alliances and FEP) do not produce significant effects in our models.

We have to reject Hypotheses 3 (district characteristics) and 4 (party ideology). District size, based on the number of registered voters, is not significantly related with party presence in overseas districts. The same holds true regarding the amount of residence countries, viewed as a measure of the distribution of voters across the district. We ran alternative models (see Table A1 in the Appendix) where we used the number of polling stations rather than the number of countries as a proxy of voter distribution. Overall, results regarding the impact of party competition and previous electoral experience remain the same, even when the variable measuring the number of voters in the district is positive and significant. The hypothesis regarding the left-right position of parties has to be rejected, as it does not seem that the decision to participate in elections in overseas districts is guided by party ideology. We also ran some alternative models using left- and right-wing party dummies (not shown) but results remain the same.

Concerning the importance of issues related to Ecuadorians living abroad in party ideology (measured as the saliency of migration issues in party manifestos), we ran a model that includes only a fraction of the Ecuadorian parties based on available data ( $N = 219$ ). There is a strong bias in these analyses since we could not find relevant information and party documents for smaller parties and for older elections and FEP are over-represented in this subset of data. Yet, results in Model 2 (see Table 2) confirm previous results and indicate that Ecuadorian parties are more likely to participate in overseas elections when party competition is low and when parties have prior electoral experience in the overseas district. In these models, the control variable of FEP is significant. Even if this database relies on a biased sample of parties in our database, it clearly indicates that the importance of emigrant-related issues in party ideology does not explain why some Ecuadorian parties decide to compete in overseas districts while others do not.

## Conclusion

This article aimed at understanding why some political parties refrain from participating in elections in some districts, while presenting candidates in others. Rather than looking at the subnational dynamics of electoral participation, we examined the strategic entry of political parties in overseas districts. Based on the Ecuadorian case, this study investigated parties’ decisions to compete (or not) in at least one of the country’s three overseas districts since 2007. The importance of overseas voting, the instability of the Ecuadorian party system and its plethora of parties and political organisations increase the intrigue of this case study. Even if it seems to be easier to participate in overseas than in national districts, given the smaller number of registered voters, the majority of Ecuadorian

parties decided not to participate in elections in these districts, contradicting the vote-seeking orientation of parties (Strøm, 1990).

Employing a quantitative analysis of all national and full emigrant parties (FEP), we demonstrated that parties with previous electoral experience in an overseas district are more likely to run for elections in the same district in the future. Similarly, the patterns of party competition in each overseas district also influence this decision: parties present candidates in districts where the number of competing parties is low and where the dominant party may proportionally obtain fewer votes. But the main findings of this article are revealed in the variables that do *not* impact the parties' decisions. The overseas district's characteristics and party ideologies do not impact the parties' decisions to compete in elections in overseas districts. It is quite surprising to observe that the decision is unaffected by the easiness to win a seat (for instance, in districts with fewer voters). Similarly, party ideology (a left or right position, or pro-migrant stances) does not affect the strategic decision and FEP – which are, by definition, more interested in emigrant-related issues – are not more likely either to compete in overseas districts than other parties. In sum, the decision of political parties to campaign abroad is based on a cost–benefit estimation rather than an ideational approach.

Drawing on the Ecuadorian case, which is influential to evaluate transnational party competition (Pedroza & Palop-García, 2017), we contribute to the existing literature in multiple ways. We created an inferential model, suitable for replication for a comparative perspective, of what Gamlen (2015) coined as the 'feedback effect'. Simply put, we operationalised the consequence of external voting rights as the strategic entry of political parties in overseas districts. In contrast, Gamlen (2015) examined the 'perceived importance' of overseas votes for parties in a country that counts the vote in the previous home district of non-resident citizens and that has incomplete information regarding emigrant voter turnout over time. We therefore provided empirical evidence on the increasingly important dynamic between emigration and homeland politics. We not only overcame the scholarly bias in studying elections predominantly at the national level, but also suggested another way to indirectly assess migrants' political engagement with their origin countries.

While this article helps us to understand party strategies in elections abroad, we should still envisage FEP that are by definition more interested in competing in overseas districts, as compared to other parties. Furthermore, our explanatory models would benefit from a systematic comparison (e.g. most-similar cases strategy) in future studies. For instance, Italy is similar to Ecuador in terms of (transnational) political competition: one overseas district but with four divisions (*ripartizioni*), coupled with a relatively high party fragmentation, proportional representation, several emigrant seats, the possibility to create FEP, and district-based competition.

Further studies should also consider adding new independent variables to the models to unpack the electoral connection between citizens living abroad and political parties. It can affect the calculus of voting and swing election results, as occurred in the 2006 Italian parliamentary election (Lafleur, 2013). The drivers for emigration might prove to be an important trigger when overseas voters decide to vote (Bocagni & Ramírez, 2013). Although on most occasions the reasons to emigrate are not singular, one may classify such motivations into the domains of economic, environmental, sociocultural and political circumstances. Non-resident citizens might not vote for a party or candidate of

their origin country that is discursively responsible for their emigration (Paarlberg, 2020; Umpierrez de Reguero & Dandoy, 2020).

Moreover, transnational party competition can also be measured by employing surveys and interviews, meaning a methodological shift from the aggregate-level to an explanation relying on individual units. In this way, scholars can delve in transnational party membership and activism, as well as partisanship. Indeed, they can more comprehensively sustain the abroad-inland nexus and explore the relevance of political discourses in multilevel arenas of competition.

Given the upcoming general elections in Ecuador in the first trimester of 2021, we cannot miss this opportunity to encourage new analyses controlling for MPAIS' presence. As indicated, MPAIS was the dominant party over this last decade, causing a noteworthy drop in the index of party fragmentation within and outside the country. Since MPAIS was divided into two party organisations as a result of the public split between Lenin Moreno and Rafael Correa in 2017–2018, MPAIS' image has worsened as compared to other political parties. We expect this context will affect Ecuadorian party competition in the near future.

## Notes

1. As of 2020, some countries that have created overseas districts to organise external voting rights but they still comprise a marginal group; however, parliamentary debates across countries and cross-national data suggest that this policy is increasing globally. To the best of our knowledge, only Cook Islands, France, Morocco and Portugal implemented it prior to the 1990s. Now voting abroad in overseas districts occurs for Algeria, Cape Verde, Colombia, Croatia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, France, Italy, Niger, North Macedonia, Mozambique, Portugal, Romania, Senegal and Tunisia (Collyer, 2014b; Palop-García, 2018; Umpierrez de Reguero, Dandoy, & Palma, 2017).
2. A system of extraterritorial voting casted externally (outside the origin country) and counted in overseas districts by the homeland authorities.
3. In the 2007 election, Ecuadorian authorities used a simple majority and d'Hondt system to convert overseas votes into seats. The seat allocation methods were d'Hondt and Webster from 2009 onwards in overseas districts. There have been small changes in the number of polling stations and the number of countries of residence where nonresident Ecuadorians could vote.
4. The number of national seats varies across elections, from 24 in 2007 to 15 in the 2017 elections.
5. As we could not access to most of the manifestos for the 2017 elections, we attributed to these missing manifestos the values that we coded for the 2019 elections.
6. We did not control for incumbency, as the variable does not vary: all incumbent parties participate in the next election in all overseas districts.
7. We also tested whether the electoral success of full emigrant parties (measured by their cumulative party vote shares in previous elections in each overseas district) had an impact on parties' strategic entry in these districts but this variable was not significant and had no impact on the models, so we do not show it here.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Explaining party presence in Ecuadorian overseas districts (alternative models).

|  | Model 3              | Model 4              |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|
| Party Competition                        | −1.643***<br>(0.411) | −1.233***<br>(0.431) |
| MPAIS vote shares                        | −0.150***<br>(0.054) | −0.091<br>(0.057)    |
| Previous elections                       | —<br>—               | 0.808***<br>(0.113)  |
| Previous elections (district-based seat) | 0.736***<br>(0.215)  | —<br>—               |
| Previous elections (national seat)       | 0.867***<br>(0.179)  | —<br>—               |
| Size district                            | 0.571<br>(0.603)     | 2.631**<br>(1.231)   |
| Number of countries                      | 0.0231<br>(0.0214)   | —<br>—               |
| Number of polling stations               | —<br>—               | −0.003<br>(0.002)    |
| Centre party                             | −0.194<br>(0.250)    | −0.182<br>(0.249)    |
| Left-wing party                          | 0.033<br>(0.165)     | 0.036<br>(0.165)     |
| Electoral alliance                       | −0.034<br>(0.186)    | −0.022<br>(0.186)    |
| Full emigrant party                      | 0.249<br>(0.257)     | 0.187<br>(0.245)     |
| Turnout                                  | −0.030<br>(0.033)    | 0.030<br>(0.025)     |
| First elections                          | −2.518**<br>(1.248)  | −0.290<br>(1.493)    |
| var(_cons[Year])                         | 0.000<br>(0.000)     | 0.000<br>(0.000)     |
| var(_cons[Year > District])              | 0.000<br>(0.000)     | 0.000<br>(0.000)     |
| Constant                                 | 10.89*<br>(6.533)    | −4.810<br>(9.201)    |
| Observations                             | 485                  | 485                  |
| Number of groups (Year)                  | 4                    | 4                    |
| Number of groups (District)              | 12                   | 12                   |
| Log likelihood                           | −211.330             | −211.209             |
| Wald chi2(11)                            | 109.58               | 109.64               |
| Prob > chi2                              | 0.000                | 0.000                |

Note: Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ . Left-wing party as reference category.