

Thick and Thin Ideological Dimensions of Electoral Competition in Latin America

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Pablo Argote² Nicolás de la Cerda³ Giancarlo Visconti⁴

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Abstract

Previous research has typically portrayed electoral competition in Latin America as structured along a single left-right dimension. We challenge this view, arguing instead that voters perceive ideological competition along two distinct axes: a *thick* left-right ideological continuum and a *thin* establishment versus anti-establishment dimension. We test this hypothesis in Chile, a country characterized as having the most unidimensional party system in the region. Using Bayesian Hierarchical Aldrich-McKelvey scaling and Item Response Theory models on an original three-wave panel survey, we find that left-right and anti-establishment attitudes are weakly correlated, thus constituting two largely orthogonal dimensions of ideological competition. Moreover, our typology combining these dimensions predicts vote choice in both observational and experimental settings. Additional evidence from Argentina and Brazil suggests a broader applicability of this framework. These results contest the dominant unidimensional model of ideological competition, offering a nuanced approach to understanding contemporary political behavior amid Latin America's rising anti-establishment politics.

Keywords: Ideology, Left-Right, Anti-Establishment Attitudes, Voting Behavior, Latin America.

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² Postdoctoral fellow, Department of Political Science, University of Southern California, argoteti@usc.edu.

³ Postdoctoral fellow, Center for Inter-American Policy and Research, Tulane University, ndelacerdacoya@tulane.edu.

⁴ Assistant professor, Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland, gvis@umd.edu.

Introduction

A broad scholarly consensus poses that contemporary Latin American party systems are, to a large extent, organized around ideological and programmatic alignments (Coppedge, 1998; Alcántara, 2003; Gramacho and Llamazares, 2007; Power and Zucco Jr, 2009; Saiegh, 2009; Wiesehomeier and Doyle, 2012; Ares and Volkens, 2017; Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023). This view holds that left-right ideological divides define political contestation, with leftist parties championing state intervention and progressive social policies, while right-wing parties advocate for market liberalization and traditional social values (Kitschelt et al., 2010; Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023). The salience and importance of these ideological divisions are evidenced by the region’s well-documented oscillation between left and right-wing “turns” (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011; Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014).

However, contemporary patterns of political competition challenge this conventional account. Latin America is currently experiencing a wave of success among populist leaders that evidently transcends left-right divides. Right-wing figures like Nayib Bukele and Javier Milei share remarkable similarities with left-wing leaders such as Gustavo Petro and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in their forceful critiques of established political elites. These developments suggest that when citizens cast their votes, they are not only considering candidates’ substantive policy positions but also their stance toward *established* political actors and institutions. This pattern underscores the need to expand our assumptions about the nature and dimensionality of electoral competition in the region.

We reconceptualize Latin American political competition as a multidimensional ideological space. We argue that voters evaluate parties and candidates along two distinct, largely orthogonal ideological dimensions: the traditional left-right spectrum —a *thick dimension*— and an establishment versus anti-establishment axis —a *thin dimension*. Electoral choices, thus, reflect the intersection of two areas: preferences around topics such as the role of the state and the market in society; *and* beliefs about whether “the establishment” or its challengers represent appropriate

vehicles for implementing those policies.

We test these expectations primarily in Chile, long regarded as a paradigmatic case of programmatic electoral competition (Kitschelt et al., 2010) and ideological unidimensionality —meaning that different policy domains align on a single ideological dimension (Rosas, 2010; Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023). From a methodological perspective, Chile is the least likely case for our theory (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). If multidimensional competition emerges in Chile, where scholars have consistently documented strong unidimensional left-right alignment, we should expect similar patterns elsewhere in the region.

Also, it is important to make two points to clarify the scope of our contribution. First, what we label as an anti-elite dimension may simply capture anti-incumbent sentiment; however, we believe these are distinct concepts that may sometimes correlate. Anti-incumbent attitudes are context-specific reactions to government performance or scandals, whereas anti-elite orientations reflect a more enduring worldview about how power is distributed (we expand on this later in the paper). Second, although throughout the paper we discuss parties and their placement in the ideological spectrum, they are not our main focus. Our goal is to show that there is variation within traditional ideological groups, and that their attitudes toward the establishment explain this variation.

This article has two analytical aims. The first concerns measurement. Leveraging data from an original panel, we employ advanced statistical techniques to capture voters' positions in a latent multidimensional space. We map voters along two distinct dimensions: a left-right economic dimension using Bayesian Hierarchical Aldrich McKelvey (HBAM) models (Bølstad, 2024), which are well suited to place voters in a common ideological space; and an establishment/anti-establishment dimension using Item Response Theory (IRT) models, which allow us to create a continuous latent space based on categorical and ordinal variables. By integrating these measures, we develop a novel six-category typology that combines left-right and anti-establishment attitudes. Critically, our approach accommodates *non-ideologues*, voters who are unwilling to identify on the left-right spectrum, but with defined views towards the political elites. Descriptive analyses show that

these categories are numerically meaningful; that is, enough respondents are located in each of the six categories,¹ including combinations of right-wing anti-establishment voters and left-wing pro-establishment ones.

Our second aim is to examine whether these measures predict voting behavior in Chile and beyond. We use the abovementioned typology to predict vote choices in several electoral scenarios. We found that, in fact, the ideology*establishment typology is highly predictive of reported voting behavior, including choices in conjoint experiments. While left-right economic preferences remain a fundamental predictor, we demonstrate that attitudes towards the establishment play a crucial role in shaping vote choice *within* the left and the right. We provide additional evidence suggesting that such typology can be smoothly applied to other Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Brazil.

While we demonstrate that voters perceive and evaluate candidates along two distinct ideological axes, a “thick” left-right dimension and a “thin” establishment versus anti-establishment dimension, these two do not capture the full complexity of voter decision-making. Electoral competition can be structured by both ideological and non-ideological elements (Adams et al., 2005; Calvo and Murillo, 2019). In practice, parties cultivate reputations for competence, credibility, and distributive capacity, traits that lie outside the traditional ideological spectrum. While our contribution focuses on the ideological dimensions of voting, we do so without undervaluing its non-ideological components.² Instead, we argue that the ideological space is a crucial anchor of electoral competition, and that is more complex than the traditional left–right spectrum. Such ide-

¹By “enough,” we meant at least 10% of respondents. In the Measurement section, we discuss the electoral implications of the percentage per category.

² These non-programmatic strategies, such as descriptive representation, issue valence, economic voting, and clientelism, do shape party-voter linkages and can drive vote choice independently of ideological stances (Carreras and İrepoğlu, 2013; Singer and Carlin, 2013; Baker and Greene, 2015; Morgan, 2015; Murillo and Visconti, 2017; González-Ocantos and Oliveros, 2019; Johnson, 2020).

ological space should incorporate the role of anti-establishment attitudes to better understand how people make electoral decisions today.

This study advances scholarship on political behavior in several ways. First, we challenge the conventional portrayal of the Latin American political space. While existing research has extensively documented the programmatic nature of electoral competition in the region, scholars have primarily analyzed three dimensions: economic, sociocultural, and regime preferences. The strong correlations typically found among these areas have led researchers to characterize Latin American political space as unidimensional.³ We argue that this characterization reflects data limitations rather than political reality. By focusing on the relationship between left-right ideology and anti-establishment attitudes, we demonstrate that political competition in the region is much more complex than previously assumed.

Second, our research advances a theoretical lens to understand electoral politics beyond Latin America. By integrating anti-establishment positions into existing spatial models of voting behavior, we provide analytical leverage for understanding two of the most significant political phenomena of the past decade: the rise of the populist right and the surge in anti-establishment attitudes. Our framework offers a systematic explanation for cross-national patterns of voter mobility between populist parties of opposing ideological camps. Rather than interpreting these patterns as inconsistent with spatial models, or evidence of voters' irrationality, our theoretical model reveals their underlying logic: for a significant segment of the electorate, anti-establishment orientations constitute a critical axis of electoral competition.

Third, our novel typology, which integrates left-right positions with anti-establishment attitudes, enables a systematic analysis of voters often excluded from conventional ideological analyses: those who decline to identify on the left-right scale. By distinguishing between anti-establishment

³ A possible concern is that some leaders, such as Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, combine left wing economic positions with certain conservative stances and thus do not fit on a single left-right scale. Even granting this, it does not follow that AMLO is more conservative than Mexico's right wing parties overall.

and pro-establishment non-ideologues, we can evaluate and demonstrate how elite attitudes structure political behavior even among citizens who reject traditional ideological labels. This is particularly significant given that approximately one-third of Latin American voters consistently decline to position themselves on the left-right spectrum ([Zechmeister, 2015](#); [Visconti, 2021](#)). Rather than treating these voters as a residual category, our framework generates testable predictions regarding their electoral behavior. The empirical results demonstrate that these distinctions are not merely theoretical; they significantly improve our ability to predict voting patterns across various electoral contexts in ways that traditional unidimensional models cannot.

Finally, our research contributes to a growing debate in American politics that, we claim, can be applied beyond the United States. We follow [Uscinski et al. \(2021\)](#) in their interpretation that looking at left-right polarization is insufficient to understand today's patterns. Instead, it is necessary to incorporate this additional establishment and anti-establishment dimension. Building on this idea, we aimed to improve the measures of both dimensions and test them in different electoral scenarios.

Ideological and Non-ideological Competition in Latin America

A wide academic consensus posits that Latin American political parties engage in both programmatic and non-programmatic forms of competition. While parties (usually) develop coherent policy alternatives to appeal to the public, which is commonly referred to as "programmatic party structuration" ([Kitschelt et al., 2010](#)), they also frequently engage in clientelism, cronyism, and personalistic appeals.

Programmatic party structuration involves political parties developing clear and distinct policy proposals and competing for public support based on them ([Kitschelt, 2000](#)). Despite some variation in the degree of programmatic politics, research in Latin America has found that parties have developed markedly ideological programs, that voters choose parties that align with their views, and that these programs are consequential once political parties assume leadership roles ([Kitschelt](#)

et al., 2010).

Evidence of political parties' ideological structuration comes from diverse sources. Elite surveys in the region have consistently shown that Latin American political parties in legislatures organize around cohesive ideological profiles (Alcántara, 2003; Power and Zucco Jr, 2009; Saiegh, 2009; Rosas, 2010). Expert surveys portray parties in a similar way, showing that they have distinct ideologies and compete based on those ideological profiles (Wiesehomeier and Benoit, 2009; Martínez-Gallardo, 2014). Research also finds important subregional differences across countries, with Chile and Uruguay consistently presenting higher levels of ideological structuration and Peru and the Dominican Republic among the less structured (Rosas, 2010; Mainwaring, 2018; Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023).

These ideological differences translate into meaningful policy outcomes. For example, recent evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how parties' ideological characteristics shaped their policy responses (de la Cerda et al., 2024). More broadly, scholars have documented systematic relationships between party ideology and policy implementation, particularly in areas such as social welfare and economic policy. Political parties' ideological profiles are associated with left- and right-wing policy implementation, and ideological turnovers in the executive lead to meaningful policy changes (Huber and Stephens, 2012; Pribble, 2013; Niedzwiecki and Pribble, 2018).

On the demand side, there are two important features. First, studies show that, to a large extent, Latin American voters place themselves on the left-right ideological scale, and that voters' ideological profiles are consistently associated with voting preferences (Zechmeister, 2015). Studies of ideological congruence further reveal meaningful alignment between voter preferences and party positions (Luna and Zechmeister, 2005; Saiegh, 2015). In short, Latin American political parties and their publics have distinct ideological profiles, which have policy consequences, leading to congruence between voters and parties.

Second, voting preferences are structured in, essentially, one dimension. While research on European politics has demonstrated that ideological competition spans multiple dimensions — economic, sociocultural, and transnational (Lipset et al., 1967; Bakker et al., 2012; Hooghe and

Marks, 2018)— Latin American party systems are characterized by the predominance of a single economic dimension (Saiegh, 2009; Rosas, 2010). Although this dimension extends beyond purely economic positions, the strong correlation between economic and socio-cultural issues, combined with the heightened salience of economic concerns, has led scholars to conceptualize Latin American political competition as primarily economic in nature (Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023)

Finally, regarding how we define or understand ideology, a long-standing debate in political behavior centers on whether citizens' ideological identifications are symbolic or operational. According to Ellis and Stimson (2012), symbolic ideology refers to the labels people use to identify themselves politically, such as “left” or “right,” regardless of whether their policy preferences align with those labels. This symbolic attachment often reflects deep-seated social identities, partisanship, or affective orientations toward political figures or parties, rather than a coherent or stable set of policy positions. On the other hand, operational ideology pertains to the substantive policy preferences that people hold, such as support for redistributive policies, regulation, or social conservatism, which may not align with their symbolic self-placement.

In our paper, we deliberately do not engage with this distinction. We do not seek to adjudicate whether Chilean voters' self-placement on the left-right scale is rooted in symbolic identity or operational preferences. Rather, we take the existence of the left-right continuum as an empirical fact: many voters do locate themselves and parties along this axis, and it does help predict electoral behavior (Zechmeister, 2015; Visconti, 2021).

Anti-Establishment Orientations as a “Thin” Ideological Dimension

Our conceptualization of anti-establishment attitudes as a distinct dimension of political competition draws from the ideational approach to populism. This framework defines populism as a “thin-centered” ideology, a narrow set of beliefs associated with three political concepts: the elite, the people, and the general will (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Within this framework,

anti-establishment views lie at the center of populist thinking, characterizing political elites as corrupt, conspiratorial, and working against public interests (Mudde, 2004).

Anti-establishment attitudes represent a critique of the status quo or opposition to those perceived to hold power. While these attitudes primarily target political elites, they can extend to other groups, such as economic ones. This flexibility becomes evident when anti-establishment parties, upon gaining power, strategically reframe who constitutes the establishment. By characterizing certain groups as corrupt and ill-intended, anti-establishment views divide the world between those who hold power and those who do not (Barr, 2009). These attitudes generate a distinct axis of political competition between the establishment and broader society (Schedler, 1996; Uscinski et al., 2021), transcending traditional political cleavages such as state versus church, workers versus capitalists, and center versus periphery (Lipset et al., 1967).

As a narrow set of normative views, populism lacks programmatic content because it does not prescribe specific policy solutions but instead emphasizes a moral division (Mudde, 2004). Unlike “thick” ideologies such as liberalism or socialism, which offer cohesive policy orientations and prescriptions, populism provides primarily a moral interpretation of the world, categorizing actors based on their perceived relationship to popular interest. Anti-establishment attitudes, as a core component of populism, share this moralistic orientation while lacking specific programmatic content. This absence of programmatic content carries crucial implications for mass political behavior: anti-establishment attitudes are less cognitively demanding than thick ideological commitments, enabling them to operate independently of left-right positioning.

Anti-establishment attitudes strongly rely on affective and emotional orientations toward those perceived as holding power (Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). What guides these attitudes is not specific programmatic or policy content, but rather assessments of different groups’ trustworthiness and their perceived capacity to implement policies without corruption. Because of their foundation in affective orientations toward social groups, which emerge naturally from social interactions (Tajfel, 1981), forming positive or negative attitudes toward groups requires less information than understanding the programmatic content of specific policies. Consequently,

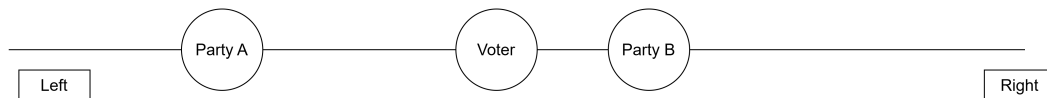
pro and anti-establishment attitudes are likely more widely distributed among the population than ideological commitments.

Beyond their reduced cognitive demands, the lack of programmatic content in anti-establishment attitudes allows these views to be combined with different and even opposing ideologies and policy positions in different areas (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Regarding the left-right political dimension, anti-establishment politics has been analyzed as a largely orthogonal dimension (Schedler, 1996; Uscinski et al., 2021). This independence is evidenced by the widespread use of anti-establishment rhetoric among politicians and parties across the ideological spectrum (Saiegh, 2009; Meijers and Zaslove, 2021; Funke et al., 2023). Consequently, we expect anti-establishment attitudes to be prevalent among both left and right-wing voters.

Hypothesis 1: Anti-establishment attitudes are largely orthogonal to left-right positions.

Contemporary politics has witnessed unprecedented levels of populism, with the past decade recording more populist executives than any period since 1900 (Funke et al., 2023). This pattern suggests that citizens are increasingly exposed to anti-establishment ideas and rhetoric, potentially shaping voters' approach to electoral decisions. Previous research demonstrates that these attitudes can increase the likelihood of voting for anti-elite political parties (Castiglioni and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2018; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019), anti-elite candidates who belong to traditional parties (Uscinski et al., 2021), and independent candidates (Argote and Visconti, 2023). Building on these findings, we argue that anti-establishment attitudes constitute a distinct dimension of political competition that shapes voting behavior independently of left-right orientations.

a) Unidimensional Ideological Competition



b) Two-dimensional Ideological Competition

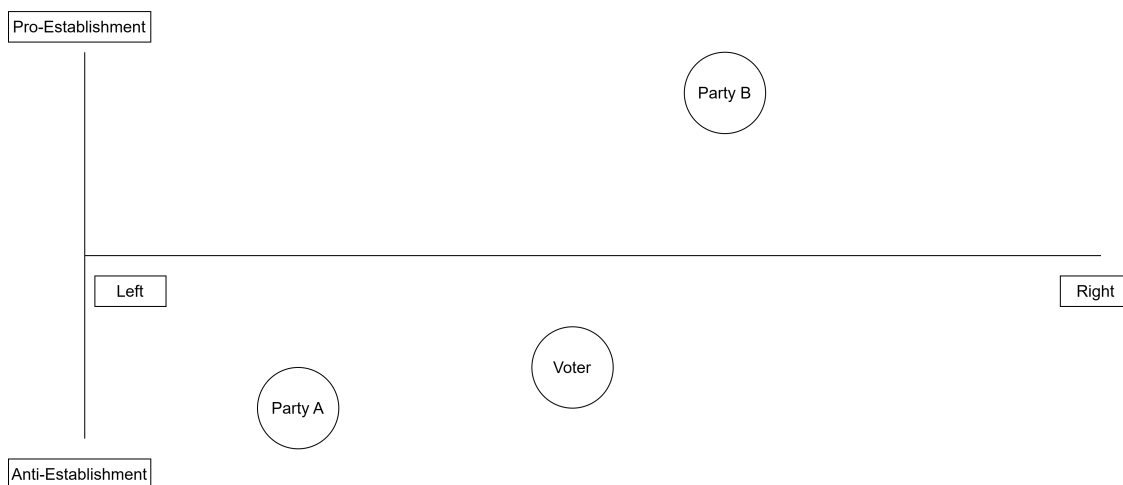


Figure 1: Dimensionality and Electoral Competition

Conceptualizing anti-establishment attitudes as a second dimension of political competition has profound implications for our understanding of contemporary voting behavior in Latin America.⁴ Traditional spatial models of voting behavior in the region assume a unidimensional ideological space where voters select candidates who minimize the ideological distance between them. Figure 1 illustrates how this assumption constrains our understanding of electoral choice. In Panel A,

⁴ We build on a rich tradition of viewing political competition as multidimensional ([Kitschelt, 1994](#); [Inglehart, 2018](#)). In Latin America, [Ostiguy \(2009\)](#) proposes a two-dimensional framework for Argentina's Peronist Party, centered on a left–right axis and a high–low axis that captures elite versus popular political styles. While both Ostiguy's framework and ours challenge unidimensional models, we focus on anti-establishment attitudes as a generalizable attitudinal dimension, rather than elite rhetoric and style, and aim for cross-national applicability.

where competition occurs only along the left-right dimension, the voter would rationally select Party B due to their proximity on this single axis. However, as shown in Panel B, incorporating anti-establishment attitudes as a second dimension fundamentally alters the spatial configuration of competition. What appears as proximity in a unidimensional space may actually represent significant distance in a bidimensional framework, potentially leading voters to select Party A instead.

Additionally, this framework enables us to capture political preferences for a substantial segment of the Latin American electorate that does not self-position on the left-right ideological scale. Contemporary spatial models of electoral competition struggle to incorporate this significant portion of voters, which comprises between 10% and 40% of the electorate across different countries in the region ([Zechmeister, 2015](#)). By incorporating anti-establishment attitudes as a second dimension, our model provides analytical leverage for understanding the political behavior of these “non-ideological” voters, thereby offering a more comprehensive account of electoral dynamics in Latin America.

Hypothesis 2: The combination of anti-establishment attitudes with traditional left-right ideologies should consistently predict electoral decisions. In particular, within each ideological camp, anti-establishment voters should prefer candidates less associated with the political elite (e.g., independent candidates)

If the proposed bidimensionality offers a valuable framework for understanding electoral politics, it should yield two observable implications. First, the typology should predict electoral decisions across different scenarios and over a relatively long time period. In other words, it must demonstrate consistent predictive power. Second, the thin dimension —pro- versus anti-establishment— should contribute uniquely to explaining vote choice. For example, a moderately left-wing voter who is strongly anti-establishment might, at times, support a non-left candidate perceived as anti-establishment. Given that independent candidates are often seen as untainted by the corrupt establishment, we would expect some of these voters to prefer the independent option ([Argote and Visconti, 2023](#)).

A possible critique of our framework is that what we identify as an “anti-establishment” or “anti-elite” dimension may in fact reflect a simpler and more familiar phenomenon: anti-incumbent sentiment. From this perspective, the thin dimension could be reinterpreted not as a reflection of attitudes toward the political elite, but rather as a reactive evaluation of current officeholders, especially under conditions of economic dissatisfaction, political disillusionment, or institutional decay.

While we believe that anti-incumbent attitudes are in fact important to understand voters’ behavior in Latin America ([Schiumerini, 2015](#); [Wiesehomeier et al., 2025](#)), we do not see it as part of a thin ideology. Anti-incumbent sentiment is inherently context-specific, varying with government performance, leadership approval, or recent scandals. Anti-elite attitudes, by contrast, can endure across electoral cycles and reflect a more general political orientation toward how power is distributed and who is perceived to control political institutions.

Chile as a Case Study

Chile has a long tradition of programmatic ideological competition ([Valenzuela, 1985](#); [Montes et al., 2000](#); [Torcal and Mainwaring, 2003](#); [Navia and Osorio, 2015](#); [Valenzuela et al., 2007](#)). Starting in the early 20th century, the country developed a programmatic party system, with parties clearly aligned with either the left (Communists and Socialists), the right (Conservatives and eventually Liberals), or the center (Radicals, and Christian Democrats) ([Mainwaring and Scully, 1995](#)). These well-defined parties with distinct programmatic agendas fostered ideological identification among the public.

The authoritarian experience (1973-1990) ultimately reinforced ideological and partisan identification ([de la Cerda, 2022](#); [Argote and Visconti, 2025](#)). The 1988 plebiscite served as a pivotal moment in crystallizing political identities, as support for or opposition to Pinochet coalesced into two broad coalitions: left-of-center parties forcefully opposed Pinochet, whereas the right backed him ([Valenzuela and Constable, 1989](#)). As a result, the concepts of left and right became closely

tied to the evaluation of the 17-year dictatorship, creating an enduring political divide (Tironi and Agüero, 1999; Bonilla et al., 2011).

In the post-authoritarian era, political parties have consistently positioned themselves along the left-right ideological spectrum, providing voters with clear cues for electoral decisions (Zechmeister, 2015; Calvo and Murillo, 2019; Visconti, 2021, 2022). Congressional roll-call voting patterns confirm this alignment, with parties structured along a left-right divide (Argote and Navia, 2018). Left-of-center parties, ranging from centrist Christian Democrats to the Socialist Party, embraced a social democratic platform advocating income redistribution and greater state intervention. Meanwhile, right-wing parties championed a conservative social agenda with market-oriented policies, emphasizing economic freedom and limited government (Luna, 2014).

This scenario remained mostly stable until the 2010s, when new left-wing parties emerged to challenge the center-left establishment. Their most prominent leader, Gabriel Boric, rapidly ascended in national politics, ultimately winning the presidency in 2021. The right also had its own internal competition. In 2017, a new party, Partido Republicano, began gaining traction, challenging the established center-right coalition. By 2021, its presidential candidate, José Antonio Kast, advanced to the second round of the election. Despite the transformation of the partisan landscape, this realignment was not driven by non-ideological outsiders. Instead, the new actors are clearly positioned within the left-right spectrum (Sazo, 2023).

Due to its stability and high levels of ideological structuration, scholars widely regard the Chilean party system as one of the most institutionalized and programmatic in Latin America. Evidence for this includes Mainwaring's estimates, which place Chile's system among the most institutionalized in the region (1995; 2018), and research indicating that its party competition is among the most ideologically structured in Latin America (Kitschelt et al., 2010; Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023).⁵

Party competition is not only largely stable and programmatically structured, but also strongly

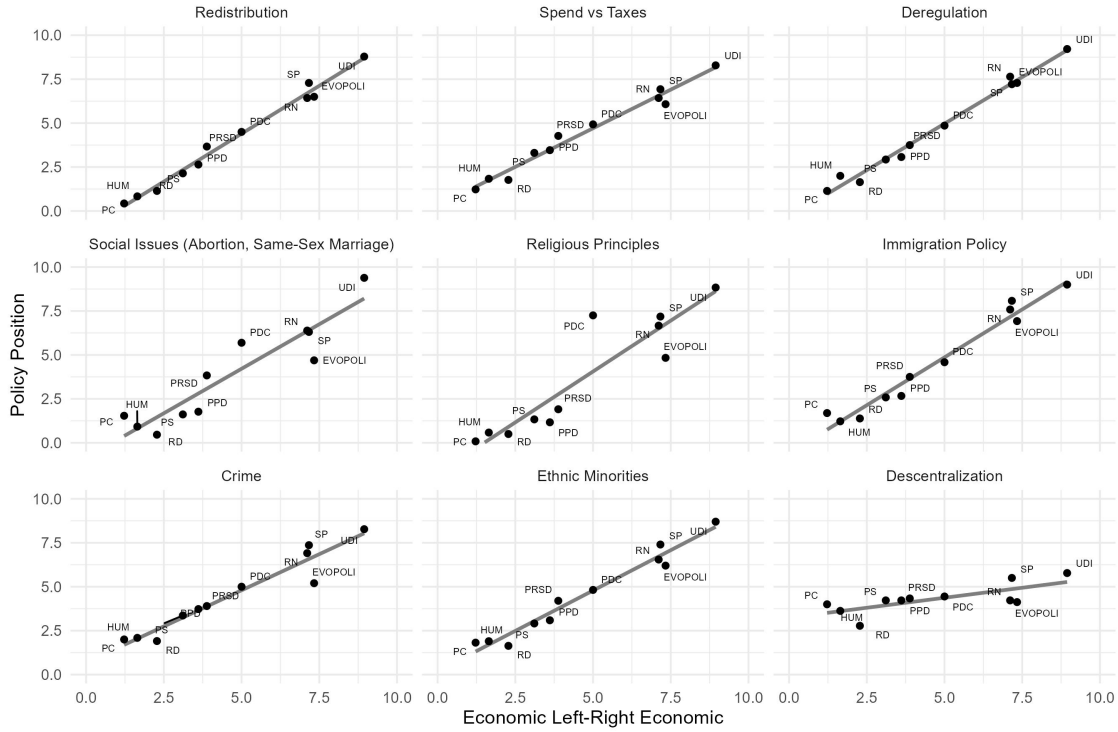
⁵ While Chile's party system is highly ideologically structured, it has also exhibited one of the largest declines in partisanship in Latin America (Luna and Rosenblatt, 2012).

unidimensional at the ideological level (Rosas, 2010; Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023). By unidimensionality, we refer to the integration of different ideological dimensions, such as economic, cultural, and regime issues, into a single overall dimension. While in highly unidimensional party systems, political parties' positions are strongly correlated across different issues, whereas in multidimensional party systems, party positions across various policy domains are weakly correlated.

Figure 2 presents an overview of party competition in Chile using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey-Latin America (CHES-LA). The figure shows a strong association between the economic left-right dimension and several other policy dimensions. Consistent with our claim of ideological unidimensionality, a political party's position on the economic left-right axis strongly predicts its stance on other issues such as redistribution, social issues, and religious principles. The clustering of parties along a roughly linear path across different policy domains visually demonstrates the strong underlying unidimensional ideological structure of the Chilean party system.⁶

⁶ While Figure 2 focuses on party stances, prior research shows that citizens in Latin America, and particularly in Chile, also tend to organize their preferences in a similarly unidimensional fashion (Zechmeister, 2015).

Figure 2: Chilean Party System Unidimensionality



The Chilean party system's strong ideological unidimensionality makes it a methodologically valuable case for detecting multidimensional competition (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). As an extreme example of unidimensionality within Latin America, Chile's historically consistent left-right structure suggests that anti-establishment attitudes should logically align with existing partisan divisions. Finding evidence of multidimensional competition in this context, therefore, would provide compelling evidence that such patterns are also present or emerging in less unidimensional systems throughout the region, strengthening the generalizability of our findings.

Data and Measurement

To examine whether ideological and anti-establishment attitudes structure political competition in Chile, we rely on a three-wave panel dataset drawn from an online nationally diverse sample of Chileans. Netquest, a survey firm with extensive experience in Latin America, collected data for all three waves. The first wave, conducted in November 2021, included 3,965 respondents selected

through quota-based sampling designed to match the Chilean census along key demographics including age, gender, region, and education. In December 2021, the firm successfully recontacted 3,075 individuals (77% of the original sample) for the second wave. The third wave, conducted two years later in 2023, achieved a 27% recontact rate, resulting in a final sample of 1,065 respondents. Table 1 presents the details regarding sample sizes and recontact rates across waves. We base our measurement of ideology and anti-establishment attitudes on variables collected during the first wave.

Table 1: Sample Sizes, Recontact Rates, and Analyses Across Waves

Wave	Sample Size	Recontact Rate (Wave 1)	Recontact Rate (Wave 2)	Analysis
Wave 1 (Nov 2021)	3,965	-	-	Latent Variables Measurement & Vote Choice
Wave 2 (Dec 2021)	3,075	77%	-	Conjoint Experiment
Wave 3 (2023)	1,065	27%	35%	Constitutional Referendum

Since left-right ideology and anti-establishment attitudes cannot be directly observed, we employ robust latent-variable estimation techniques to measure these constructs. For ideology, we leverage respondents’ placements of themselves and seven political parties on a 10-point left-right ideological scale to estimate their position using Hierarchical Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey (HBAM) scaling (Bølstad, 2024). The Aldrich-McKelvey scaling family of models are specifically designed to address issues arising from differing perceptions and interpretations of scales across respondents. In the Aldrich-McKelvey framework, survey responses to ideological items are conceptualized as a function of “true positions” and perceptual biases (Aldrich and McKelvey, 1977). By explicitly modeling and correcting for these biases, this measurement technique can be used to obtain standardized self-placements on a common ideological scale devoid of differences in the way the scale is interpreted.

We implement a Bayesian version of the Aldrich-McKelvey (BAM) model because it offers two methodological advantages: the ability to handle datasets with missing observations and the provision of uncertainty estimates for ideological positions (Hare et al., 2015). To further improve

the precision of these estimates, we employ the hierarchical extension (HBAM) introduced by Bølstad (2024), which reduces sensitivity to error and minimizes the risk of overfitting. This strategy has been successfully used to obtain unbiased estimates of party positions across several regions of the world (de la Cerda et al., 2025). We implemented the HBAM model using the `hbamr` package in R.

To measure anti-establishment attitudes, we estimated a latent trait measure using Item Response Theory (IRT) based on eight survey items. These items capture diverse aspects of anti-establishment sentiment, including distrust of politicians and political parties, preferences for independent candidates over party-affiliated ones, and perceptions of the establishment/anti-establishment divide as more salient than traditional left-right ideology.⁷

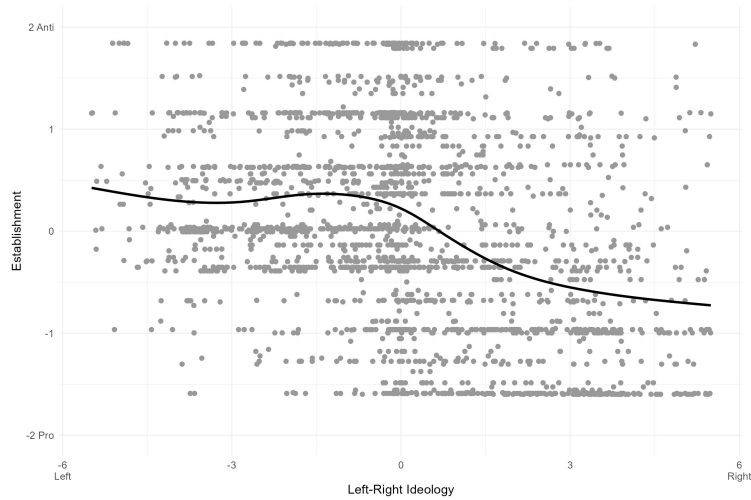
We employed IRT models over alternatives such as confirmatory factor analysis because IRT models are specifically designed for estimating latent traits from categorical response data, which comprise most of our survey items. IRT models assume that responses to items can be modeled using item response functions. Item response functions give the probability that a person with a given level of a latent trait will endorse an answer. IRT models can be distinguished by the link function and the number of parameters used to represent the item response. In this case, given that all the items used are binary, we use a logistic link function. While models with a lower number of parameters are less computationally demanding, more complex models allow for more flexibility and commonly lead to better levels of fit. We chose a 4-parameter model based on model fit. As shown in Table A2 in the supplemental material, all fit statistics exceed conventional thresholds, indicating that our measurement model adequately captures the underlying anti-establishment construct (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

Figure 3 presents the distribution of anti-establishment and left-right latent scores. Panel a) displays a scatterplot with left-right ideological scores on the x-axis and anti-establishment scores on the y-axis. Along with the points, we fitted a smoothed line to assess the extent to which

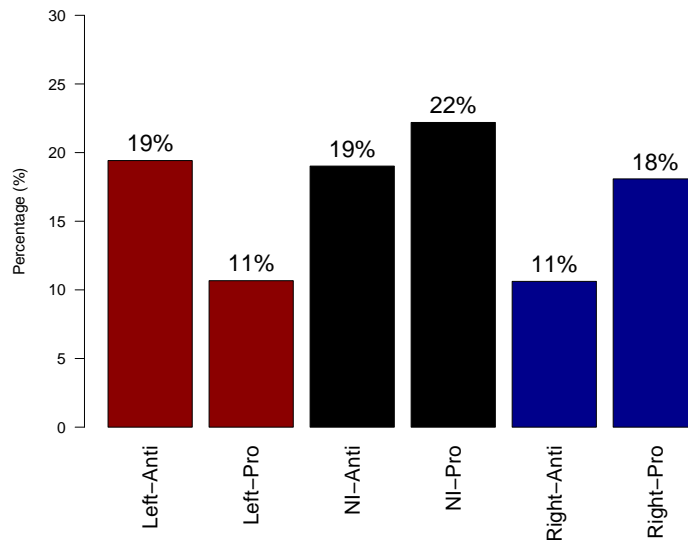
⁷The complete wording of all eight survey items is available in the supplemental material, table A1.

scores on one dimension are related to the other. The results from this panel show that left-right and anti-establishment attitudes are largely orthogonal. While there are differences in the average levels of anti-establishment attitudes across left and right-wing identifiers, with left-wing identifiers presenting higher average levels, within each group, there are no observable differences in anti-establishment attitudes. Crucially, all four quadrants of panel a) are populated with survey respondents, including the off-diagonal ones with left-wing pro-establishment and right-wing anti-establishment voters. This provides strong evidence in favor of hypothesis 1.

Given that not every respondent places themselves on the left-right axis, we developed a typology that combines left-right ideology and anti-establishment attitudes. This typology includes two categories for respondents who do not position themselves on the left-right spectrum but who hold either an anti-establishment stance (anti-establishment non-identifiers) or a pro-establishment stance (pro-establishment non-identifiers). Considering that approximately 30% of Latin Americans do not self-place on the left-right axis, we believe this approach is valuable not only for our study but also for future research on ideological voting in the region. Panel b) illustrates the prevalence of each category, which aligns with conventional understandings of Chilean voters: a higher proportion are left-wing and anti-establishment compared to left-wing and pro-establishment, right-wing individuals are more likely to be pro-establishment, and 40% of those interviewed do not identify with left-right ideology.



(a) Scatterplot Left-Right and Pro-Anti Establishment



(b) Frequency Distribution Typology Ideology*Establishment

Figure 3: Ideology*Establishment Typology

Source: Netquest panel.

Predicting voting Behavior

Reported Vote Choice

The paper's second section analyzes whether our proposed typology predicts electoral preferences. To this end, using the Ideology*Establishment Typology, we regress a dichotomous variable

representing reported vote choice⁸ on the ideology-establishment typology and a set of controls — gender, education, socioeconomic status, and age. We use a linear probability model (LPM) to simplify the interpretation of each coefficient. These can be described as follow:

$$Left_i = \beta_0 + \sum_{j=1}^5 \beta_j(typology_j)_i + \delta(Dem)_i + \varepsilon$$

$$Right_i = \beta_0 + \sum_{j=1}^5 \beta_j(typology_j)_i + \delta(Dem)_i + \varepsilon$$

Where voting for the left (right) in the 2021 election is regressed on the ideology*establishment typology, and a set of demographic controls.⁹

⁸The survey was conducted before the first round of the 2021 presidential election. Reported vote choice corresponds to the candidate that respondent i expects to vote in the future.

⁹Controls are gender, age, education, and socioeconomic status.

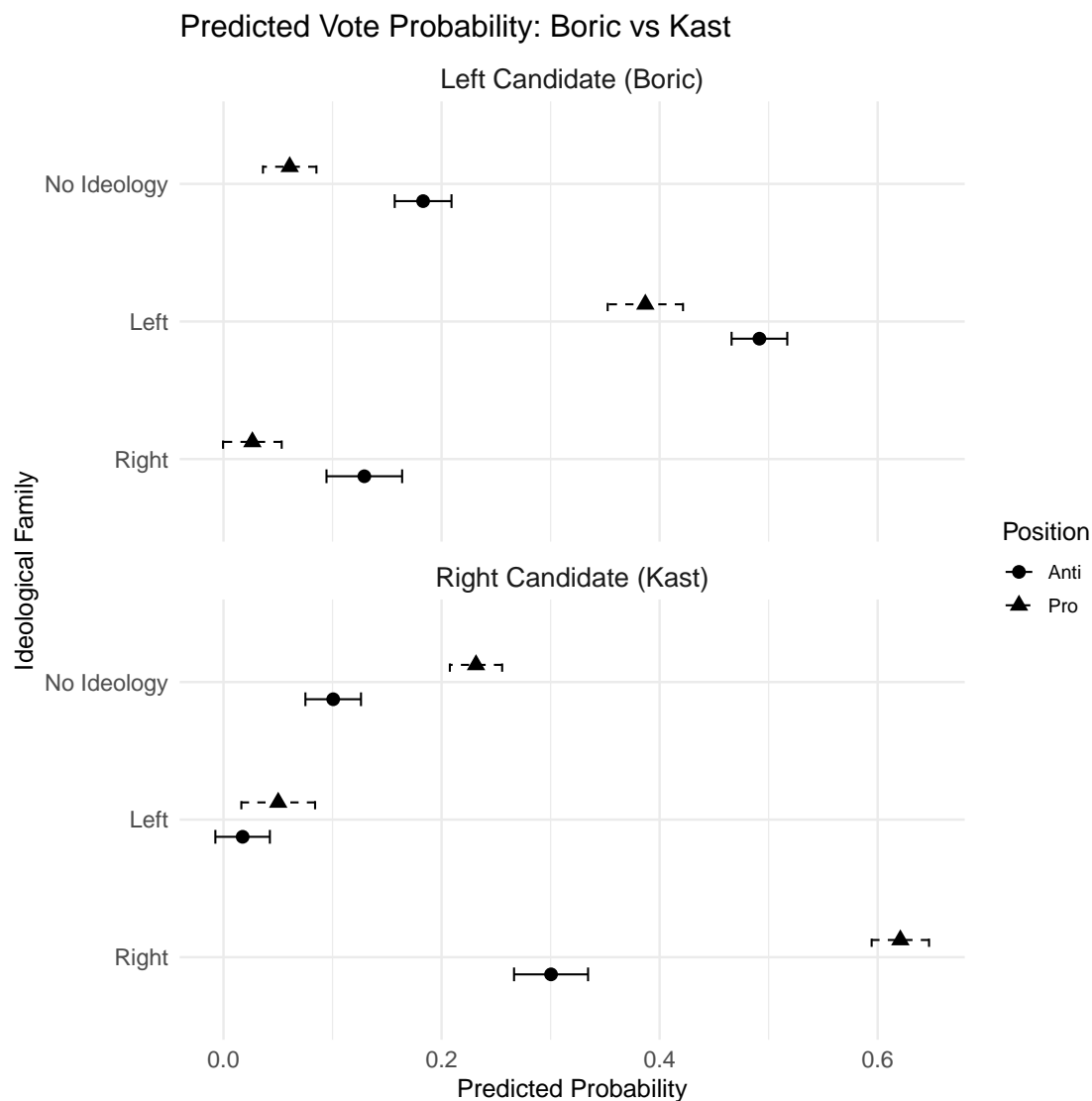


Figure 4: Reported Vote Choice 2021 Presidential Elections

The typology is highly predictive of voting decisions. Figure 4 displays the marginal means of the vote for the left (left panel) and the right (right panel) in the 2021 election. The top left panel shows that the marginal means for both pro and anti-establishment leftists are around 0.45. This suggests that the left-wing candidate, Gabriel Boric, was able to attract these two factions of the left. Considering that in the survey, support for the left candidate was 20%, it represents a considerable correlation. When looking at the top right panel, the right-wing candidate —José Antonio Kast— was able to attract mostly the pro-establishment faction of the right.

Conjoint Experiment

In addition, we use data from a conjoint experiment embedded in the second wave of the survey, where we present respondents with an alternative electoral scenario. Specifically, we presented profiles of two hypothetical presidential candidates, each with four randomized attributes: political affiliation, occupation, age, and gender. Our primary attribute of interest is the political affiliation of the hypothetical candidate, who could belong to the right, the left, or independent.¹⁰ Since each paired comparison was repeated five times per respondent, we clustered standard errors at the respondent level.

Certainly, we are not interested in whether the average voter prefers the left or the right. Instead, our aim is to determine potential differences in electoral choices *within* each ideological camp, based on our typology. For instance, within the right (left), we want to determine if respondents classified as anti-establishment are more willing to prefer independents than those who resemble a pro-establishment candidate. To this end, we estimated a regression of the following form:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Independent_i + \beta_2 Typology_i + \beta_3 Typology * Independent_i + \sum_{j=1}^2 \delta_j Occupation(j)_i + \sum_{j=1}^3 \tau_j Age(j)_i + \eta Gender_i + \varepsilon$$

Where the choice of candidate Y_i is regressed on the randomized attributes of the conjoint experiment, and the ideology*establishment typology. We display the results for each subgroup separately, which can be recovered with the interaction term. Importantly, we allow for abstention, because we consider this a more realistic scenario given that voting was voluntary at the time.

Figure 5 shows the marginal means of this analysis. The top panel displays the coefficients for right-wing respondents, separated by whether they are classified as anti or pro-establishment. Both

¹⁰We classify each group of parties ideologically based on CHES-LA ([Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023](#)).

groups have a preference for right-wing candidates; notably, the average anti-establishment rightist voter is significantly more likely to prefer independents. Among the left, we observe an analogous result. Among people without an ideology, we observe a clear trend: those with anti-establishment attitudes have a strong preference for independents, whereas those with pro-establishment attitudes are indifferent between an independent and a leftist candidate.

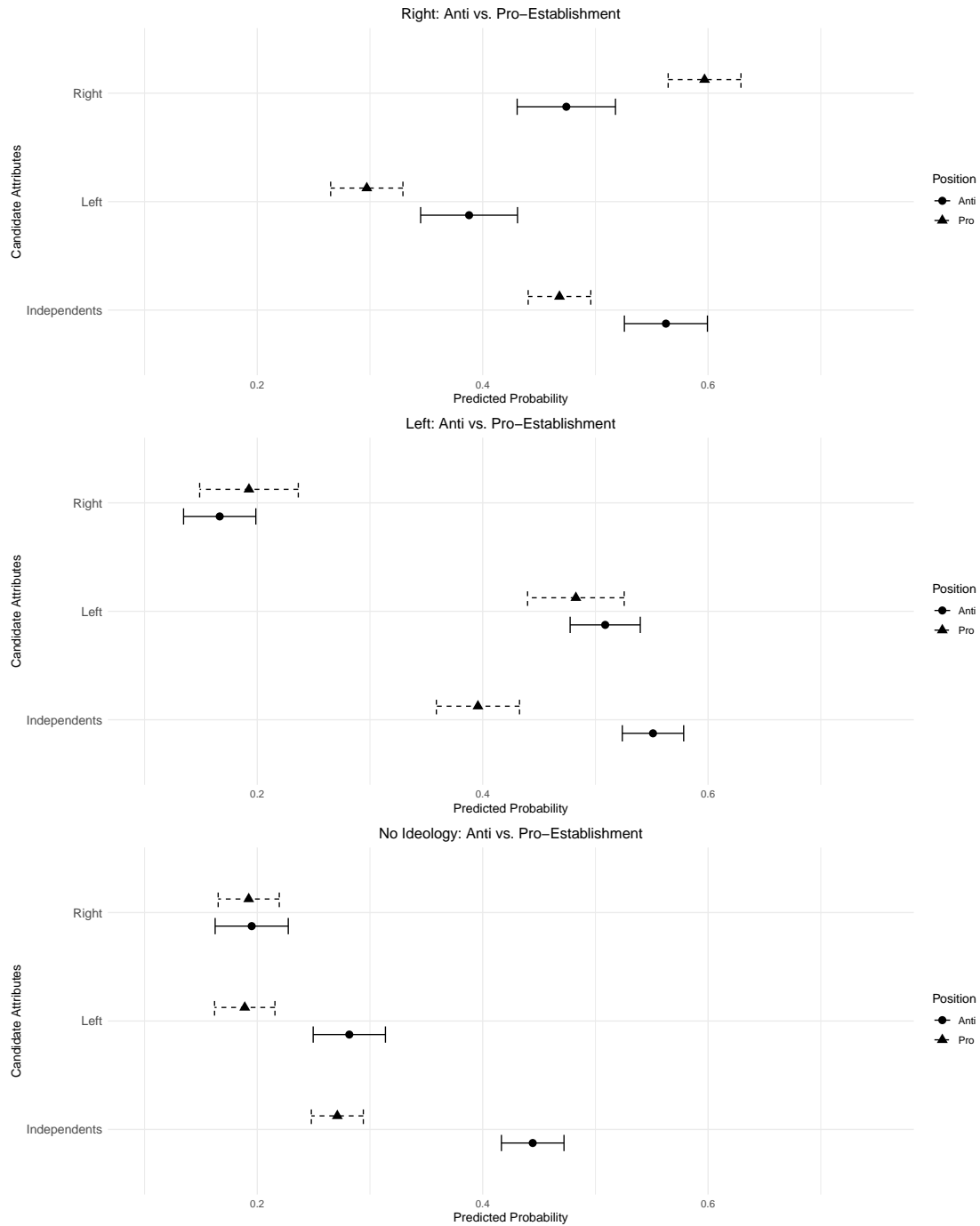


Figure 5: Electoral Preferences Across Subgroups

In addition to the observed substantive differences between pro and anti-establishment voters, this analysis provides evidence that anti-establishment attitudes measured on wave 1 can shape electoral decisions on wave 2. This is relevant as it shows that anti-establishment attitudes are

relatively stable political traits.

In addition to the observed substantive differences between pro- and anti-establishment voters, this analysis provides evidence regarding the stability and predictive validity of anti-establishment attitudes across time. Anti-establishment attitudes, measured in Wave 1 (November 2021), systematically predict electoral preferences in Wave 2 (December 2021), demonstrating that these attitudes constitute relatively enduring and consequential political dispositions rather than ephemeral reactions to immediate political events. This temporal stability is theoretically significant because it supports our conceptualization of anti-establishment sentiment as a durable 'thin' ideological dimension that structures electoral choice.

External Validity

Are these findings generalizable to Latin America? We attempt to improve the external validity of our main findings by using survey data from Argentina and Brazil to examine whether similar patterns and trends exist in how people make electoral decisions. We expect that the relationship between ideology and anti-elite attitudes in structuring voting behavior is not unique to Chile but extends to other Latin American contexts, given previous evidence on the relevance of left-right orientations ([Zechmeister, 2015](#)) and anti-establishment attitudes in the region ([Cox and Garbiras-Díaz, 2024](#)).

We use data from the 2023 Latinobarómetro, relying on the question of whether the country is governed by powerful elites for their own benefit (rather than for the people's benefit) to capture anti-elite attitudes.¹¹ Ideology is measured using the traditional left-right continuum, while education, age, and gender serve as control variables. To capture electoral outcomes, we use respondents' stated willingness to vote for a given political party. In Argentina, we classify support for Libertad Avanza as support for Milei, while support for FPV, PJ, Frente de Todos, or Frente

¹¹ "Generally speaking, would you say that (COUNTRY) is governed by a few powerful groups for their own benefit, or that it is governed for the good of all the people?"

Renovador is categorized as support for Massa. In Brazil, we define support for PT as backing Lula and support for PL as backing Bolsonaro. We apply a conservative criterion by considering only parties that directly supported a given candidate in the first round.

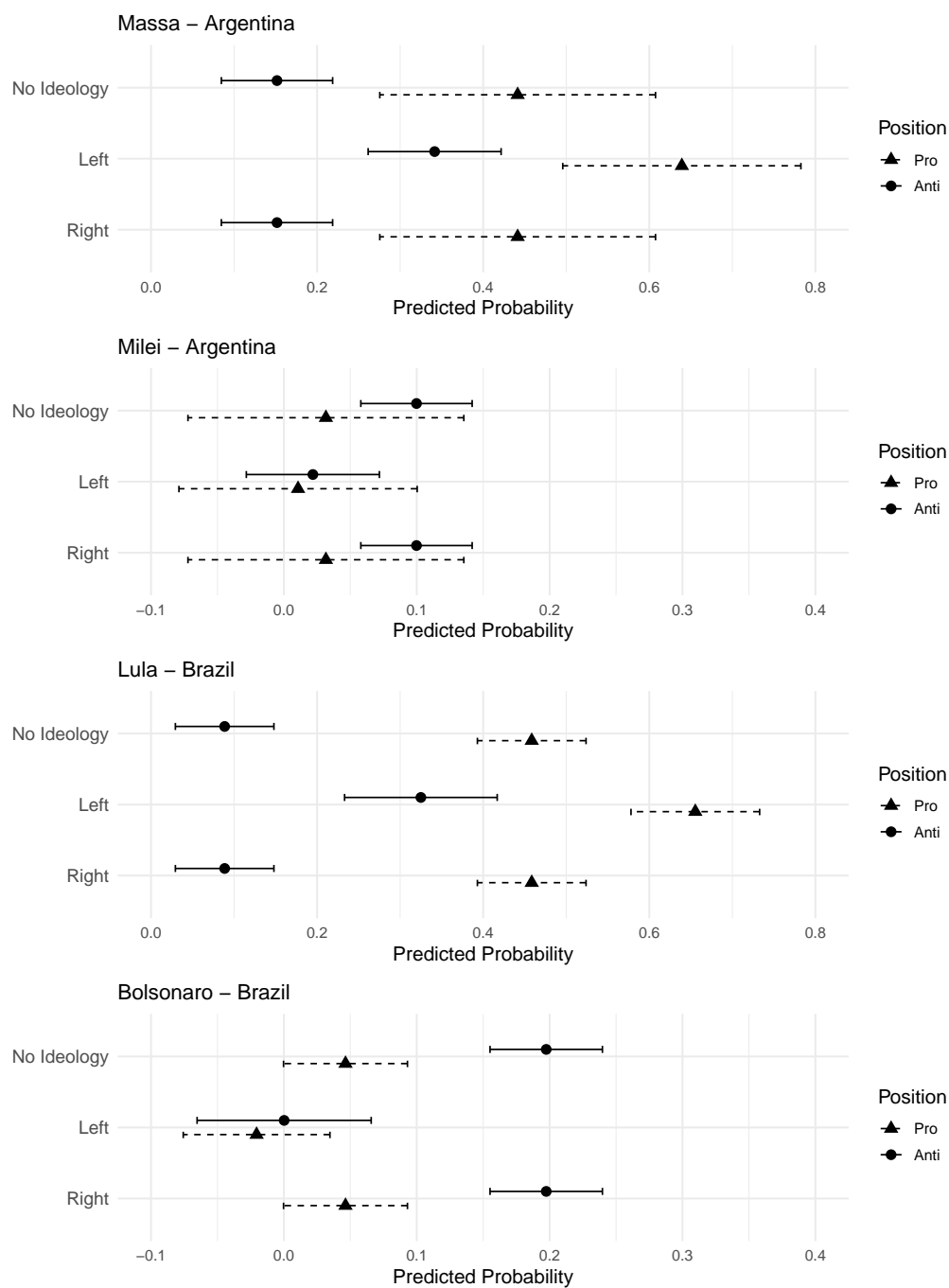


Figure 6: Electoral Preferences Across Subgroups

Figure 6 presents the predicted probabilities of supporting Milei and Massa in Argentina.¹² The results indicate that Right and Anti-Elite voters exhibit the strongest support for Milei, aligning with his anti-establishment rhetoric. Conversely, Left-Elite voters show the highest predicted support for Massa, consistent with his position as a center-left establishment candidate. Right-Elite voters also demonstrate some level of support for Massa, reinforcing the idea that establishment-aligned voters —regardless of ideology— tend to support mainstream candidates. The low predicted support for Milei among Left-Elite and Right-Elite voters further suggests that anti-elite attitudes are crucial for understanding support for populist outsiders. It is important to note that the results for Milei are noisier and less conclusive. In Argentina, the sample was collected in June 2023, several months before the election. At that time, support for the current president, Milei, was significantly lower. He gained substantial support over the course of the campaign (Murillo and Oliveros, 2024), which may have contributed to the more speculative nature of the findings in his case.

Similarly, Figure 6 shows predicted support for Bolsonaro and Lula in Brazil. As expected, Right-Anti-Elite and No Ideology-Anti-Elite voters strongly favor Bolsonaro, while Left-Elite voters overwhelmingly support Lula. However, a notable finding is that Right-Anti-Elite voters display some degree of support for Lula, reinforcing the argument that anti-elite attitudes do not align perfectly with ideological identification. This pattern suggests that voters may prioritize their dissatisfaction with the establishment over ideological consistency when choosing candidates.

These results strengthen the external validity of our findings by confirming that voting behavior in Latin America cannot be understood through a unidimensional ideological framework alone. Instead, the interaction between ideology and attitudes toward the elite plays a crucial role in shaping electoral decisions. The presence of consistent patterns across different countries supports

¹²Predicted values are derived from a linear probability model (LPM). While the y-axis is labeled as "Predicted Probability," LPM estimates can fall outside the 0–1 interval, and in some cases take negative values or exceed one. We retain the LPM specification for ease of interpretation and comparability across typology categories.

the claim that anti-elite sentiment is a defining feature of contemporary political competition in the region.

Robustness Checks

It is important to confirm that our results are consistent under different electoral scenarios. Thus, as a robustness check, we will test whether our typology predicts electoral choices in three alternative electoral scenarios, to ensure that our results are not driven by only one election. The next three robustness checks confirm the results reported in Figure 4.

In Figure 4, we show the predictive power of our typology regarding vote choices, using the first two majorities as outcomes. In Figure B1, we show how our typology predicts votes for other candidates: Parisi (populist right), Provoste (center-left), and Sichel (center-right). In the top panel, we observe that Parisi had support among anti-establishment rightists and purely anti-establishment voters. Provoste, in turn, drew support almost exclusively from pro-establishment left-wing voters, whereas Sichel obtained support from right-wing establishment voters. In this sense, the typology fits the predictions for other candidates.

A second electoral scenario that we consider as a robustness check corresponds to the second round of the 2021 election. Even though a second round involves fewer candidates, we expect the categories from our typology to fit the profiles of the candidates. As Figure B2 shows, we observe a predictable result: Boric attracted a coalition of pro- and anti-establishment leftists, and Kast did the same among the right. Mr. Boric performed much better among the anti-establishment and no-ideology groups, which explains his triumph.

Third, we examine another electoral contest held a year after the 2021 election using the second wave of our panel data. In September 2022, the country voted in a referendum to approve or reject a new constitution with a distinctly progressive character. All left-of-center parties supported the proposal, while centrist, center-right, right-wing, and far-right parties opposed it. Given this political landscape, we would expect that only left-wing voters—both pro- and anti-

establishment—would support such a proposal. The results, presented in Figure B3, confirm this expectation. The proposal received strong support from both leftist groups and some backing from voters without a defined ideology and with anti-establishment views. In contrast, an overwhelming majority of right-wing voters and pro-establishment individuals without a defined ideology rejected the proposed constitution.

A fourth robustness check relates to the independent power of views about the establishment among centrist voters, that is, voters who do not feel comfortable identifying with one of the two ideological camps—left or right. If our hypothesis is correct, then a centrist anti-establishment voter should prefer, on average, an independent candidate compared to a partisan one. Figure B4 shows exactly that: centrist and anti-establishment respondents are more likely to prefer independents in the conjoint experiment compared to centrist and pro-establishment respondents. This confirms that our typology allows us to understand voters who are typically excluded from many analyses.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper challenges the prevailing assumption that political competition in Latin America is structured solely along a unidimensional left-right ideological spectrum. Instead, we argue and demonstrate that voter behavior is shaped by both thick and thin ideological dimensions. The first represents a more traditional understanding of ideology, focusing on conventional debates about the role of the state in the economy. The latter pertains to attitudes toward the political elite. Notably, these two form independent axes of competition, meaning that voters and candidates can be positioned in different areas within the two-dimensional ideological space. This has profound implications for our understanding of political competition in Latin America and beyond.

In our empirical analyses, we provide strong evidence that anti-establishment sentiment is an independent force shaping electoral behavior. While left-right ideology remains a crucial determinant of vote choice, our typology, which integrates ideological preferences with establishment at-

titudes, reveals that ideology alone does not fully explain voting behavior. For instance, right-wing voters may exhibit different electoral behavior depending on whether they hold anti-establishment views. Likewise, voters with anti-establishment attitudes, regardless of their ideological leanings, are more likely to support candidates perceived as outsiders or challengers to the political status quo.

This study contributes to two streams of research: the study of anti-establishment attitudes and the examination of multidimensional political competition in Latin America. Our argument builds on [Uscinski et al. \(2021\)](#), who demonstrate that anti-establishment attitudes operate independently from left-right positions in the US, and [Ostiguy \(2009\)](#), who show that Argentine politics encompasses multiple dimensions of competition. However, our argument moves beyond these contributions by offering a unified, generalizable framework that combines thick (left-right) and thin (establishment/anti-establishment) ideological dimensions to explain electoral behavior across Latin America. While [Uscinski et al. \(2021\)](#) emphasize the role of anti-establishment orientations in American polarization, and [Ostiguy \(2009\)](#) highlights elite-popular styles in Argentine politics, we show that a two-dimensional ideological space is empirically observable and politically meaningful even in countries like Chile, long regarded as ideological unidimensional. While consistent with [Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser \(2019\)](#)'s conceptualization of anti-establishment attitudes as social identity, our approach focuses on affective orientations toward political elites without requiring the theoretical apparatus of identity formation.

These results also align with research documenting the rise of political disaffection and anti-establishment sentiment in Chile ([Joignant et al., 2016](#); [Segovia, 2017](#); [Somma et al., 2021](#); [Rhodes-Purdy and Rosenblatt, 2023](#); [Titelman and Sajuria, 2023](#); [Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2024](#)). Beginning in the 2000s, Chile experienced a marked decline in party identification accompanied by plummeting trust in public institutions ([de la Cerda, 2022](#)). The 2019 "Estallido Social" (Social Outbreak) represents the most vivid manifestation of these sentiments. What began as student protests against subway fare increases quickly escalated into widespread demonstrations across the country. Scholars widely interpret this movement as an anti-elite mobilization driven by accumu-

lated frustration toward the political establishment ([Serrano-Moreno and Osorio, 2023](#)). Political parties, which were already struggling to connect with voters before 2019 ([Luna and Rosenblatt, 2012](#)), experienced an unprecedented disconnection from the public during these protests. Survey data indicate that a majority of Chileans now believe parties neither understand their needs nor effectively represent their interests ([Disi and Mardones, 2019](#)). Our findings contribute to this growing literature by demonstrating how the bidimensional framework of ideology helps explain the electoral consequences of this widespread disaffection. For this literature, the key point is that anti-establishment attitudes operate independently from traditional left-right positioning.

Our findings also contribute to broader debates on political realignments in Latin America. While scholars have documented the increasing prominence of populist movements across the ideological spectrum, our study provides a systematic framework for understanding how voters navigate this shifting political landscape. By showing that anti-establishment attitudes are orthogonal to left-right ideology, we explain why electorates can oscillate between left-wing and right-wing populist candidates with relative ease. This finding is particularly relevant given the rise of figures such as Javier Milei in Argentina, Gustavo Petro in Colombia, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, who have successfully mobilized anti-establishment sentiment despite their distinct ideological positions. Therefore, Latin America is not experiencing the collapse of ideological voting with the rise of anti-elite politicians but rather the interplay between thick and thin ideological dimensions, which together structure contemporary political competition.

From a methodological perspective, our study also advances the measurement of ideology. By categorizing voters along these two dimensions, we can generate expectations and test empirical patterns regarding non-ideologues, who constitute approximately 30% of the Latin American electorate ([Zechmeister, 2015](#)), thereby allowing us to incorporate a category of voters commonly treated as residual into our analysis. The robustness of our results across multiple countries further strengthens our conclusions, indicating that the proposed bidimensionality is not only applicable to Chile, but can also be extended to other Latin American countries such as Argentina and Brazil.

Ideology remains a fundamental lens through which we understand voting behavior. In fact, we

suggest it remains the key anchor of electoral competition, providing stability and predictability to electoral outcomes. Although we do not directly test the relative importance of ideological voting and alternative voting models, our paper suggests that ideology is crucial, but often underrated, in the Latin American context. Perhaps one reason for this omission is the exclusive reliance on traditional definitions, such as pro-market versus pro-state, which limits our ability to capture its full complexity.

Ideological labels are not static; they take multiple forms and meanings depending on historical, social, and political contexts. Rather than viewing ideology as a rigid, one-dimensional spectrum, we argue that it consists of both thick and thin descriptions of reality. The thick dimension encompasses deeply rooted ideological commitments to economic models, social structures, and institutional frameworks, while the thin dimension reflects more fluid, affective, and situational attitudes, such as trust in elites and populist sentiments. Recognizing this multidimensionality allows us to better explain why voters who share similar left-right economic preferences may still diverge in their political choices based on their attitudes toward the establishment.

Anti-elite attitudes have become key when understanding contemporary voters behavior, reflecting the growing prominence of outsider candidates and movements across the world. However, analyzing politics solely through this lens is limiting, as it overlooks the broader ideological landscape in which anti-elite sentiments operate. Anti-establishment voters and candidates do not exist in an ideological vacuum; they navigate a political arena where debates over economic models, social policies, and institutional structures remain central. Anti-elite attitudes, therefore, are not independent of ideology but rather interact with it in meaningful ways.

While we focus on voters, future research must explore how political parties navigate and coordinate along both thick and thin ideological dimensions, making strategic decisions about their positioning and messaging. Understanding how parties determine their movement within this multidimensional space, either by rejecting establishment politics or recalibrating their ideological appeals, is crucial for developing a more comprehensive understanding of elite behavior. Additionally, in a context where challengers are consistently winning elections against incumbents, it is

essential to examine whether voters perceive political challengers as merely those who oppose the established thick ideological framework, those who reject the prevailing thin ideological order, or a combination of both.

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