

Synthesizing Research through Total Model Space: The Case of Democracy and Growth (with Andrés Cruz and John Gerring)

Abstract

Combining features associated with conventional literature reviews, meta-analyses, model-averaging, and robustness tests, we propose to learn from the assemblage of models contained in the literature and use them to construct an even more expansive model space. This total model space (TMS) is supposed to encompass all plausible tests of a specific research question. Using the example of democracy's suspected impact on growth, we show how the TMS can provide a more complete understanding of whether X is related to Y and how robust the relationship is. Moreover, our approach enables researchers to study which features contribute to a more optimistic or pessimistic conclusion, what combination of design choices are needed in order to reach standard thresholds of statistical significance, and how extant studies can be evaluated relative to that much larger set of plausible potential studies for the same research question. In this fashion, the TMS approach promises to contribute to the cumulation of knowledge, enabling researchers to narrow the range of potential disagreements and focus discussions on design choices that are most consequential.